

DEMONS BY DAYLIGHT



RAMSEY CAMPBELL

DEMONS BY DAYLIGHT

by RAMSEY CAMPBELL

With publication of Ramsey Campbell's first book, *Inhabitant of the Lake*, in 1964, Arkham House introduced to American devotees of imaginative fiction the work of a young British author who created his own special world with fresh talent and high promise.

Demons by Daylight fulfills that promise and establishes further the foundation of Campbell's growing literary stature. His tales are rooted in his native milieu and environment, the haunts and byways of London, Liverpool, Brixton. They are peopled with the contemporary youth of social change, restless and in ferment. Their settings are a rock festival "Be-In" at a dance hall, the attractions at an amusement park, the sinister interior of an old dockside warehouse, the dim recesses of a woodland grove. The author writes of these from a background of sharply observed reality, and his dialogue captures the speech and idioms of today.

But these familiar elements of life and living form only the point of departure for journeys into the unknown, the unreal, the terrifying. Was the event in *Potential* actually a demonic rite or only the product of psychotic disorder? Did the object *Made in Goatswood* possess a power beyond all understanding? And let those who long for *The Enchanted Fruit* take heed of consequences from eating thereof.

Far reaches of the mind fascinate Ramsey Campbell, and with superior skill he combines them with unsuspected attributes of matter to make *Demons by Daylight* a book of tales that will linger long in memory.

* * *

The jacket is the work of the eminent British artist and illustrator, Eddie Jones.

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6.00

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Campbell, Ramsey
Demons by daylight

Campbell, Ramsey
Demons by daylight. Arkham House,
1973.
153 p.

I. Title

6.00

LC 77-169745

DEMONS BY DAYLIGHT

Ramsey Campbell



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Ramsey Campbell

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ARKHAM HOUSE: Publishers
Sauk City, Wisconsin
1973

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By Ramsey Campbell

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Library of Congress Card Catalogue Number: 77-169745

This book is
to Jenny
for everything;
in memory of August Derleth, friend and critic;
and
to my mother
without whom it would scarcely have
been possible;
to Betty Kujawaw
who first suggested publication;
to Kirby McCauley
who encouraged it;
and, if they don't mind, to Tony and Kate,
Barry and Sylvia, Stan Lee, Barry Smith,
Jack Kirby, Denny O'neil, Neal Adams, and
many others who in their different ways have
kept me going meanwhile.

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Nightmares

POTENTIAL

On the poster outside the Cooperative Hall, forming from the stars twined in the foliage, Charles had read: "BRICHESTER'S FIRST BE IN --FREE FLOWERS AND BELLS!" But in the entrance hall, beyond the desk where a suspicious muscle-man accepted his ten shillings, two girls were squabbling over the last plastic bell. Searching in the second cardboard carton, Charles found a paper flower whose petals were not too dog-eared, whose wire hooked into his buttonhole without snapping. "Bloody typical," a boy said next to him. "I'm going to write to the *International Times* about this."

He meant it wasn't a true love-in, Charles supposed, fumbling with terminology. He'd once bought the *International Times*, the underground newspaper, but the little he had understood he hadn't liked. Uneasily he watched the crowds entering the ballroom. Cloaks, shawls, boys with hair like dark lather, like tangled wire. Charles adjusted his "Make Love Not War" badge, conscious of its incongruity against his grey office suit. He glanced up at the names of groups above the ballroom door: the Titus Groans, the Faveolate Colossi. "OK, guys and gals, we've got a fabulously faveolate evening ahead for you," he muttered in faint parody. "Come on," said the boy at his side, "let's go in."

Through the entrance Charles could see swaying figures merged by chameleon lights and hear drums like subterranean engines; as they entered the guitars screamed, a spotlight planged through his eyes to expand inside his skull. "Let me adjust," he said to his companion, anything to gain time. Threads of joss-smoke curled into his nostrils, sinuous as the hands of a squatting girl, Indian dancing for an encircling intent audience. A middle aged man left the circle, which closed, and wandered ill at ease: a reporter, Charles

thought. He searched the vast ballroom; groups of thirteen year old girls dancing, multicolored spotlights painting faces, projectors spitting images of turbulent liquid on the walls, on the stage the Faveolare Colossi lifting guitars high in a faintly obscene gesture. "Ready?" asked the boy at his side.

They danced toward two girls. sixteen, perhaps, or younger. A crimson light found Charles, when it moved away his face stayed red. Each time he moved his foot it was dragged down by a sense of triviality; he thought of the file left on his desk last night, to be dealt with on Monday morning. He sensed the reporter watching him from the shadows. The music throbbed to silence. The two girls glared at Charles and walked away. "Not much cop, anyway," said his companion—but then he seemed to see someone he knew he vanished in the murk.

On the balcony above the ballroom a girl wearily blew bubbles through the shafts of colored light. They settled, bursting when they touched floor or flesh: Charles saw his life. "Are you a flower person?" a voice asked—it was the reporter, twirling a paper flower.

"No less so than you, I should think." Charles felt cheated—the boys with flowers behind their ears, the girls dancing together like uneasy extras in a musical, the jagged lances of sound, the lights excruciating as the dazzle of scraped tin, gave him nothing less than the fragments he'd retained from books on philosophy.

"I'm not one—Good Lord, no. I'm just searching."

Charles sensed sympathy. "You're not a reporter?"

"Never have been. Is that what I look like? No wonder they've all been watching me."

"Then why are you here?"

"For the same reason as you," the other said. "Searching."

Charles supposed that was true. He stared about—at the far end from the stage a bar had been given over to lemonade. "Let me stand you a drink," the other said.

At the bar Charles saw that the man's hands were trembling, he'd torn the paper petals from the wire. Charles couldn't walk away, he searched for distraction. On stage the leader of the Titus Groans was staggering about, hands covering his eyes, crying "Oswald, Kennedy, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe." The speakers round the ballroom squealed and snorted. "Kill, kill!" screamed the Titus Groan, setting fire to a cardboard amplifier. Charles glanced away, at caped figures in a corner. "Sons of Dracula," he muttered in a weak Karloff parody. The other laughed. "You're a good mimic," he said.

Charles thought of the office: moments when he'd felt the conversation move away from him and improvised an imitation to hold attention. He stared at the figures smoking gravely in the corner, until he saw the flash of a packet of Woodbines.

"If someone had given you LSD or hashish, would you have accepted?" the other asked, sipping a Coke and belching.

"I don't know. Perhaps." Something to set him apart from the people at the office, though they'd never know: he hadn't even dared to wear his badge among them.

"You feel empty. You're looking for something to fill you, to expand your mind as they'd say." The man's hands were shaking again, the glass jangled on the bar.

"Ja, iss right, Herr Koktor," but it didn't work. "I suppose you're right," Charles said.

The Titus Groan was casting flowers into the crowd. Suddenly Charles wanted one—then immediately he didn't: it was trivial. Girls scrambled for the flowers; as they converged they changed from red to green. "Gerroff!" yelled one. "I think —" Charles said. "I know," the other agreed. "Let's leave."

In the entrance hall the pugilist behind the desk peered at them suspiciously. "By the way, my name's Cook," the man mentioned. "Charles," Charles said.

They emerged into the main street, behind the blue lamps the moon was choked by clouds. A passing couple eyed Charles' flower and "Make Love Not War" and shook their heads, tut-tut. "I know you bought that badge for the occasion," Cook remarked. "You might as well take it off."

"I do believe in it, you know," Charles said.

"Of course," Cook said. "We all do."

Tomorrow Charles might say "Last night I met a philosopher"—but once he'd claimed as his own a description of a robbery told him by a friend, only to be taunted by his neighbor at the office. "Yes, I saw that too. Last week on tv, wasn't it?" Two boys passed, tinkling with beads and bells. Charles was about to offer Cook a drink, he'd formed vague friendships at the office thus. But Cook was struggling to speak.

"I wonder —" he mumbled. The moon fought back the clouds, like an awakening face. "I don't know you very well, but still—you seem sympathetic . . . Look, I'll tell you. I'm meeting some friends of mine who are experimenting with the mind, let's say. Trying to realize potential. It sounds dramatic, but maybe they can help you find yourself." His head shook, he looked away.

He was nervous, Charles could see: it was as if he'd drained Charles' unease into himself, leaving Charles the power to calm him. "I'll try anything once," Charles said. Blinded by the lamps like photofloods, the moon shrank back into the clouds.

They walked toward a side street where Cook's car was parked. In the unreal light the shops rose to Victorian facades, annihilating time. Charles wondered what they'd give him: LSD, lights, hypnosis? In the Be-In the pounding sound and leaping lights had reminded him somehow of brainwashing. He didn't like the idea of hypnosis. he wanted to be aware of his actions, to preserve his identity. Perhaps he'd simply watch the others.

Down a side street, on a stage of light from a pub door, two men fought. Charles couldn't look away. "I thought so," Cook said. "You're one of us."

In the next street Cook's car waited, its headlights dull like great blind eyes. "I hope you're not too perfect," Cook mumbled, unlocking the door. "They can't abandon me, not now. No, I'm just suspicious by nature, I know that." Savagely he twisted the ignition key, and shuddered. "They're in Severnford," he said.

Darkness spread again over the last house like decay, and the road dipped. As they swept over a rise Charles saw the distant Severn: a boat drifted quietly and vanished. Hills were lit like sleeping colossi, over them the moon bounced absurdly before the clouds closed. Suddenly Cook stopped the car. The darkness hid his face, but Charles could make out his hands working on the wheel. Cook rolled the window down. "Look up there," he said, pointing an unsteady finger at a gap in the clouds exposing the universe, a lone far frosty star. "Infinity. There must be something in all that to fill us."

In Severnford they pulled up near the wharf. The streets were lit by gas lamps, reflected flickering in windows set in dark moist stone. "We'll walk from here," Cook said.

They crossed an empty street of shops. On the corner of an alley Cook stopped before a window: socks, shirts, skirts, bags of sweets, tins of Vim, along the front of the pane a line of books like a frieze. "Do you read science fiction?" Cook asked.

"Not much," Charles said. "I don't read much." Not fiction, anyway, and retained little.

"You should read Lovecraft." Next to the tentacled cover a man fought off a razor, hands flailing, eyes pleading with the camera. Cook almost gripped Charles' arm, then flinched away. They entered the alley. Two dogs scrabbling

at dustbins snarled and ran ahead. In a lighted window, above the broken glass which grew from the alley wall, someone played a violin.

Beyond the houses at the end of the alley ran the Severn. The boat had gone; tranquil lights floated against the current. Gas-lamps left the windows of the houses dark and gaping, shifted shadows behind the broken leaning doors. "Over here," Cook said, clearing his throat.

"Here?" Cook had headed for a disused pub, its dim window autographed in dust. Charles wavered: was Cook perhaps alone? Why had he lured him here? Then Charles looked up; behind the sign—THE RIVERSIDE—nailed across the second storey, he glimpsed the bright edge of a window and heard a hint of voices, mixed with some sound he couldn't place. Cook was swallowed by the lightless doorway, the two dogs ran out whimpering. Charles followed his guide.

Beer-bottles were piled in pyramids on the bar, held together by Sellotape, in the topmost candles flared, their flames flattened and leapt, briefly revealing broken pump-handles on the bar-top like ancient truncheons, black mirrors from which Charles' face sprang surprised, two crates behind the bar cloaked in sacking. POLICE ARE PEOPLE TOO was painted on a glass partition; for a moment it appeared like the answer of an oracle. "Oh, the police know about this," Cook said, catching Charles' eye. "They're used to it by now, they don't interfere. Upstairs."

Beyond the bar a dark staircase climbed, as they mounted past a large unseen room, through whose empty window glimmered the Severn, the voices hushed, giving way to the sound which worried Charles. Cook knocked twice on a panelled door. A secret society, thought Charles, wondering. The door opened.

Sound rushed out. Charles' first thought was of the Be In: a united shriek of violins, terrifying. Inside the long room faces turned to him. "Take off your shoes," Cook said, leaving his own in the row at the door, padding onto the fur which carpeted the flat.

Charles complied uneasily, postponing the moment when he must look up. When he did they were still watching, but not curious, clearly eager to know him. He felt accepted, for the first time he was wanted for himself, not a desperately mimicked image. The young man in black who had opened the door circled him, shoulder length ringlets swaying, and took his hand. "I'm Smith," he said. "You're in my flat."

Cook hurried forward. "This is Charles," he stuttered.

"Yes, yes, Cook, he'll tell us his name when he's ready."

Cook retreated, almost tripping over someone prone on the fur Charles surveyed; boys with hair they shook back from their faces, girls already sketched on by experience, in a corner an old couple whose eyes glittered as if galvanized writers, perhaps. They weren't like the people at the office, he felt they could give him something he sought. Against the walls two speakers shrieked; several of the listeners lay close, crawling closer "What's that?" Charles asked.

"Penderecki. *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*."

Charles watched the listeners in the violins the imaginative might hear the screams of the victims, in the pizzicati the popping of scorched flesh. Near one speaker *Beyond Belief* protected a veneer from a pub ashtray, next to it lay *New Worlds Speculative Fiction*, *We Pass From View*, *Le Sadisme au Cinema*, an *International Times* and a pile of Ultimate Press pornography, above which, mute, stared Mervyn Peake's Auschwitz sketches "Smoke?" Smith asked, producing a gold cigarette-case.

"No thanks," Charles said, when he knew them better he'd try the marijuana, if that was what it was.

"I will," Cook interrupted, taking a black cigarette

The violins died. "Time?" someone suggested.

"I'll make sure." Smith turned to Charles apologetically "We don't use words unless they're meaningful " He padded to a corner and opened a door which Charles hadn't noticed; beyond it light blazed as at the Be In Charles thought he heard voices whispering, and a metal sound He glanced about, avoiding the faces, outside the window loomed the back of the pub sign A wall hid the river from him, but he could still see the quiet boat in the moonlight He wished they'd speak instead of watching him, but perhaps they were waiting for him to declare himself. He wished Cook wouldn't stand at the bookcase, his shivering back aware of Charles.

Smith appeared, closing the door The faces turned from Charles to him "Charles has come to find himself," he said "In there, Charles "

They stood up and surrounded the door, leaving a path for Charles They were eager -too eager, Charles hesitated He'd wanted to be part of something, not alone and acted upon But Smith smiled deprecatingly, the fur lulled Charles' nerves like a childhood blanket. He started forward "Wait," Smith said He stared at Cook, still trembling before the bookcase "Cook," he called, "you want to participate. You be guide."

"I feel sick," said Cook's back.

"You don't want to leave us after so long."

Cook shuddered and whirled to face them. He looked at Charles, then away. "All right," he whispered, "I'll help him." Beckoned by Smith, he preceded Charles into the other room.

Charles almost turned and ran, he couldn't have said why; but he was inhibited against rejecting people he'd just met. He strode past the eyes into the blazing light.

At first he didn't see the girl. There was so much in the way: cameras on splayed tripods, blind blinding spotlights climbed by cords like Lovecraft tentacles, in the centre of the floor a rack of knives and razors and sharp instruments, carefully arranged. He heard what must be the whimper of a dog on the wharf. Suddenly he peered through the twined cords and thrust Cook aside. A girl was tied to the wall. Her arms were crucified high. She was naked.

The jigsaw fitted—*International Times*, pornography, the cameras, pornographic films—but Charles felt no revulsion, simply anger. He'd come so far for this. Then a glimpse of crimson drew his eye to the gap where the girl's left little finger should have been. Unbelieving, he stared at the floor, at the pattern of crimson tracing the agonized flurry of her hand.

"Make your choice," Cook said.

Slowly Charles turned, sick with hatred. Cook had retreated to the door; over his shoulder the others craned for a better view. "Make your choice," Cook repeated, indicating the rack of knives; his voice trembled, and the girl looked back and whimpered. "Let what is in you be you. Release your potential, your power."

Charles couldn't look at the girl, if he did he'd be sick. He could feel her pleading with him. He approached the rack, his stockinged feet clung to the floor as in a nightmare. He touched a knife, its blade mutilated his reflection, its edge was razor-sharp. He clutched the handle and glanced with prickling eyes toward the door. It wouldn't work. Too far to run. He struggled to remove the knife from the rack.

"Go on, Cook, help him," Smith said. The girl sobbed. Cook turned about, trembling. "Cook," Smith said.

Cook sidled toward Charles, his eyes appealing like a dog's as they linked the girl and Charles: Charles was his nightmare. Almost at the rack, Cook stood shaking and glared toward the girl. "My God!" he cried. "You haven't—"

"My wife?" Smith called. "Not even I."

The knife slid from the rack and was at once in Cook's stomach. Yet

Charles saw the blade flash on Cook's face, flayed not so much by terror as by knowledge. Cook fell on the knife. Charles closed his eyes. Blindly he wiped his hands on his jacket. At last he faced them, and almost knew what Cook had known. They were watching him with a new expression: worship.

Behind him he heard movement. He had to turn. The girl was pulling her hands free of the cords, flexing her little finger which had been hidden in her palm, wiping off the crimson paint on a cloth from the floor. As she passed Charles she stretched out her hand to touch him, but at the last moment lowered her eyes and knelt before Cook's body. Smith joined her and they linked hands. The others followed and knelt, the old couple sinking slowly as their charge was drained. They turned up their faces to Charles, waiting.

You made this happen! he might have shouted to defeat them. You staged this, you invented it! It means nothing.

And all he'd done had been to perform their script—But his hand had held the knife, his hand still felt it plunge, his hand displayed the blade beneath which they cowered. Within him something woke and swelled, tearing him open, drawing him into itself. They saw; they knew. The girl stretched out her hands toward him, and they chorused a name

At once it was outside his body, no longer part of him. For a moment he was filled by the innocence of oblivion. Then, finally, he knew. He felt what they had called forth sucking him out like an oyster, converting him into itself, the pain as his molecules ripped asunder as if his fingers were being wrenched loose. He cried out once. Then blood fountained from his mouth.

They moved whispering through the flat, eyes averted. Two of them supported Cook's body to his car. "In the hills, remember," Smith whispered.

He returned to the studio, head bowed. "The river?" someone asked, pointing to the dry grey shape on the floor.

"It's nothing now," Smith said. "It won't be recognized. The front door."

They gathered up the husk and piled it into a paper carrier, where it rasped, hollow. Someone took the bag down through the pub. The candles had guttered. He threw the contents of the bag into the street beneath the gas-lamps, and the dogs converged snarling to fight. Then he rejoined the others, as reverently they raised their eyes to what filled the flat, and waited for it to speak.

THE END OF A SUMMER'S DAY

"Don't sit there, missus," the guide shouted, "you'll get your knickers wet!"

Maria leapt up from the stone at the entrance to the cave. She felt degraded; she saw the others laugh at her and follow the guide—the boisterous couple whose laughter she'd heard the length of the bus, the weak pale spinster led by the bearded woman who'd scoffed at the faltering Chinese in front, the others anonymous as the murmur bouncing from the bus roof like bees. She wouldn't follow, she'd preserve her dignity, hold herself apart from them. Then Tony gripped her hand, strengthening her. She glanced back once at the sunlight on the vast hillside tufted with trees, the birds cast down like leaves by the wind above the hamburger stall, and let him lead her.

Into blindness. The guide's torch was cut off around a corner. Below the railed walk they could sense the river rushing from the sunlight. Tony pulled her blouse aside and kissed her shoulder. Maria Thornton, she whispered as an invocation, Maria Thornton. Goodbye Maria West, goodbye forever. The river thrust into blind tunnels.

They hurried toward the echoing laughter. In a dark niche between two ridged stalactites they saw a couple—the girl's head was back, gulping as at water, their heads rotated on the axis of their mouths like planets in the darkness. For a moment Maria was chilled; it took her back to the coach—the pane through which she'd sometimes stared had been bleared by haircream from some past kiss. She touched what for a long time she couldn't bring herself to name—they'd finally decided on Tony's "mannood." On the bus she'd caressed him for reassurance, as the bearded woman's taunts and the

Chinese gropings grew in her ears; nobody had noticed. "Tony Thornton," she intoned as a charm.

A light fanned out from the tunnel ahead; the tallow stalactites gleamed. "Come on, missus," the guide called, "slap him down!"

The party had gathered in a vault; someone lit a cigarette and threw the match into the river, where it hissed and died among hamburger-papers. "I am come here to holiday," the Chinese told anyone who'd listen.

"Isn't it marvellous?" the bearded woman chortled, ignoring the spinster pulling at her hand. "Listen, Chinky, you've come here *on* holiday, right? *On* holiday. You'd think English wasn't good enough for him," she shouted.

"Oh, Tony, I hate this," Maria whispered, hanging back.

"No need to, darling. She's compensating for fear of ridicule and he's temporarily rootless. He'll be back home soon," he said, squeezing her hand, strong as stone but not hard or cold.

"Come on, you lot," the guide urged them on, holding his torch high. "I don't want to lose you all. I brought up last week's party only yesterday."

"Oh, God! Oh, hoo hoo hoo!" shrieked the boisterous couple, spilling mirth. "Hey, mate, don't leave me alone with him!" screamed the wife.

The party was drawn forward by a shifting ring of light, torn by stalactites like tusks. Behind her Maria heard the couple from the niche whisper and embrace. She kissed Tony hungrily. One night they'd eaten in a dingy cafe, dog-eared tablecloths, congealed ketchup, waitresses wiping plates on serviettes. At another table she'd watched a couple eat, legs touching. "She's probably his mistress," Tony had said in her ear, gently he showed her such things, which previously she'd wanted to ignore. "Do you want me to be your mistress, Tony?" she'd said, half-laughing, half yearning, instantly ashamed—but his face had opened. "No, Maria, I want you to be my wife."

Deep in shade a blind face with drooping lips of tallow mouthed. Peering upward, Maria saw them everywhere: the cave walls were like those childhood puzzle-pictures which once had frightened her, forests from whose trees faces formed like dryads. She clung to Tony's arm. When they were engaged she'd agreed to holiday with him, they'd settled for coach-trips, memories to which they had returned for their honeymoon. One day, nine months ago, they'd left the coach and found a tower above the sea, they'd run through the hot sand and climbed. At the top they'd gazed out on the sea on which gulls floated like leaves, and Tony had said, "I like the perfume." "It's lavender-water," she'd replied, and suddenly burst into tears. "Oh, Tony, lavender-water, like a spinster! I can't cook, I take ages to get ready, I'll be no good in bed—I'm

meant to be a spinster!" But he'd raised her face and met her eyes; above them pigeons were shaken out from the tower like handkerchiefs. "Let me prove you're not a spinster," he'd said.

The guide carried his torch across a subterranean bridge; beneath in the black water, he strode like an inverted Christ. The faces of the party peered from the river and were swept glittering away. "Now, all of you just listen for a moment," the guide said on the other side. "I don't advise anyone to come down here without me. If it rains this river rises as far as that roof." He pointed. But now, when he should be grave, his voice still grinned. "I don't like him," Maria whispered. "You couldn't rely on him if anything happened I'm glad you're here, Tony." His hand closed on hers. "It can't last for ever," he told her. She knew he was thinking of the hotel, and laid her head against his shoulder.

"So long as the roof doesn't *cave in*!" yelled the boisterous man.

"Cave in!" the guide shouted, resonating from the walls; the faces above gave no sign that they'd heard. "Ha, ha, very good! Must remember that one." He poured his torch-beam into a low tunnel and ushered them onward. Behind her on the bridge Maria heard the couple from the niche. She lifted her head from Tony's shoulder. Thinking of the hotel—the first pain had faded, but in the darkness of their bedroom Tony seemed to leave her; the weight on her body, the thrust inside her, the hands exploring blindly, were no longer Tony. Yet she wasn't ready to leave the light on. Even afterward, as they lay quiet, bodies touching trustingly, she never felt that peace which releases the tongue, enabling her to tell him what she felt. Often she dreamed of the tower above the sea; one day they'd return there and she'd be wholly his at last.

The vault was vast. The walls curved up like ribs, fanged with dislocated teeth about to salivate and close. Behind her, emerging from the tunnel, the other couple gasped. Stalactites thrust from the roof like inverted Oriental turrets or hung like giant candles ready to drip. The walls held back from the torch-beam; Maria sensed the faces. In the depths dropped laughter. The party clustered like moths around the exploring torch. "Come on, love birds, come closer," the guide echoed. "I've brought thirty of you down and I don't want to have to fiddle my inventory." Maria thrust her fingers between Tony's and moved forward, staying at the edge of light.

"Now before we go on I want to warn you all," the guide said sinisterly. "Was anybody here in the blackout? Not you, missus, I don't believe it! That's your father you're with, isn't it, not your husband!" The boisterous

woman spluttered. "Even if you were," the guide continued, "you've never seen complete darkness. There's no such thing on God's earth. Of course that doesn't apply down here. You see?" He switched off the torch.

Darkness caved in on them. Maria lost Tony's hand and groping, found it. "Oh, God! Where was Moses!" yelled the boisterous couple. The young girl from the niche giggled. Somewhere, it seemed across a universe, a cigarette glowed. Whispers settled through the blackness. Maria's hand clenched on Tony's; she was back in the bedroom, blind, yearning for the tower above the sea.

"I hope we haven't lost anyone," the guide's face said, lit from below like a waxwork. "That's it for today. I hope someone knows the way out, that's all." He waved the torch to draw the procession. Laughing silhouettes made for the tunnel. Maria still felt afraid of the figure in the dark; she pulled Tony toward the torch. Suddenly she was ashamed, and turned to kiss him. The man whose hand she was holding was not Tony.

Maria fell back. As the light's edge drew away, the face went out. "Tony!" she cried, and ran toward the tunnel.

"Wait," the man called. "Don't leave me. I can't see."

The guide returned, figures crawled from the tunnel like insects, drawn by the light. "Don't be too long, love-birds," he complained. "I've got another party in an hour."

"My husband," Maria said unevenly. "I've lost him. Please find him for me."

"Don't tell me he's run out on you!" Behind the guide the party had reformed within the vault, Maria searched the faces shaken by the roving torch-beam, but none of them was Tony's. "There he is, missus!" the guide said, pointing. "Were you going to leave him behind?"

Maria turned joyfully, he was pointing at the man behind her. The man was moving back and forth in shadow, arms outstretched. The torch-beam touched his face, and she saw why. He was blind.

"That's not my husband," Maria said, holding her voice in check.

"Looks like him to me, love. That your wife, mate?" Then he saw the man's eyes. His voice hardened. "Come on," he told Maria, "you'd better look after him."

"Is husband?" the Chinese said. "Is not husband? No."

"What's that, mate?" asked the guide—but the bearded woman shouted. "Don't listen to the Chink, he can't even speak our language! You saw them together, didn't you?" she prompted, gripping her companion's arm.

"I can't say I did," the spinster said.

"Of course you did! They were sitting right behind us!"

"Well, maybe I did," the spinster admitted.

"Just fancy," the boisterous woman said, "bringing a blind man on a trip like this! Cruel I call it."

Maria was surrounded by stone faces, mouthing words which her blood swept from her ears. She turned desperately to the vault, the man stumbling in a circle, the darkness beyond which anything might lie. "Please," she pleaded, "someone must have seen my husband? My Tony?" Faces gaped from the walls and ceiling, lines leading off into the depths. "You were behind us," she cried to the girl from the niche. "Didn't you see?"

"I don't know," the girl mused. "He doesn't look the right build to me."

"You know he isn't!" Maria cried, her hands grasping darkness. "His clothes are wrong! Please help me look for Tony!"

"Don't get involved," the girl's escort hissed. "You can see how she is."

"I think we've all had enough," the guide said. "Are you going to take care of him or not?"

"Just let me have your torch for a minute," Maria sobbed.

"Now I couldn't do that, could I? Suppose you dropped it?"

Maria stretched her hand toward the torch, still torn by hope, and a hand fumbled into hers. It was the blind man. "I don't like all this noise," he said. "Whoever you are, please help me."

"There you are," the guide rebuked, "now you've upset him. Show's over. Everybody out." And he lit up the gaping tunnel.

"Wonder what she'd have done with the torch?" "The blind leading the blind, if you ask me," voices chattered in the passage. The guide helped the blind man through the mouth. Maria, left inside the vault, began to walk into the darkness, arms outstretched to Tony, but immediately the dark was rent and the guide had caught her arm. "Now then, none of that," he threatened. "Listen, I brought thirty down and thirty's what I've got. Be a good girl and think about that."

He shoved her out of the tunnel. The blind man was surrounded. "Here she is," said someone. "Now you'll be all right." Maria shuddered. "I'll take him if you don't feel well," the guide said, suddenly solicitous. But they'd led the blind man forward and closed his hand on hers. The guide moved to the head of the party, the tunnel mouth darkened, was swallowed. "Tony!" Maria screamed, hearing only her own echo. "Don't," the blind man pleaded piteously.

She heard the river sweep beneath the bridge, choked with darkness, erasing Tony Thornton. For a moment she could have thrust the blind man into the gulf and run back to the vault. But his hand gripped hers with the ruthlessness of need. Around her faces laughed and melted as the torch passed. They'd conspired, she told herself, to make away with Tony and to bring this other forth. She must fall in with them; they could leave her dead in some side tunnel. She looked down into the river and saw the sightless eyes beside her, unaware of her.

The guide's torch failed. Daylight flooded down the hillside just beyond Anonymous figures chewed and waited at the hamburger stall. "All right, let's make sure everybody's here," the guide said. "I don't like the look of that sky." He counted, faces turned to her, the guide's gaze passed over her and hurried onward. At her back the cave opened, inviting, protective. "Where are we?" the blind man asked feebly. "It feels like summer."

Maria thought of the coach trip ahead, the Chinese and the girl unsure but unwilling to speak, the bearded woman looking back to disapprove of her, the boisterous couple discussing her audibly—and deep in the caves Tony, perhaps unconscious, perhaps crawling over stone, calling out to her in darkness. She thought she heard him cry her name, it might have been a bird on the hill. The guide was waiting; the party shuffled, impatient. Suddenly she pushed the blind man forward, he stumbled out into the summer day. The others muttered protests, the guide called out—but she was running headlong into darkness, the last glint of sunlight broken by her tears like the sea beneath the tower, the river rushing by beneath. As the light vanished, she heard the first faint patter of the rain.

AT FIRST SIGHT

"To you," someone said.

Valerie squirmed. Across the pub table they were swapping jokes, dirtier and funnier. At her side Len looked embarrassed. When they'd all met from the office to celebrate Tony's twenty first they'd paired off outside the pub; seeing Valerie unescorted, Tony had called Len, who'd been trying to merge with the mist of this last night of October. He'd sat with her for two hours, but the third time he'd rammed his finger through a beer-mat her smile of encouragement had drooped. Val was a mirror; if someone stood before her mute then her tongue would fail her too. She looked away from the dulled diamond facets of the tankards multiplied into the froth, beneath the second ceiling of smoke, to the clock above the bar—only five minutes to go, thank God. Someone knocked a table, glass shattered. She regarded the mist which breathed on the panes, and from the corner of her eye saw something rising, falling back.

"To you," he said.

At last her eye caught his, he was seated at a table near the bar, and as she looked he rose and lifted his glass to her. Dark sleek hair straight as his comb's teeth, dark intense eyes, swarthy face ten years older than her own, black belted raincoat, the brass buttoned leather teenagers at his table stared and laughed. Val saw the black glove which raised the glass toward her, and stood up. "To you," she responded.

Around her smoke puffed out and curled, mixed with laughter, she sensed Len looking up at her, looking away.

The man reached behind him, gripping the table with his other black-gloved hand. "To us," he called.

Val hesitated. Behind her Len said: "Look, can anyone do this?" flipping a beer-mat high with his fingers, catching it in mid-air. "To us," she called, and behind the man saw the teenager lean forward, catch his glove and start to pull it free, shouting "What's this then, mate, Marks' and Spencer's?" Her heart throbbed, her skin iced. The man turned, put down his glass and gripped the boy's wrist. The boy looked up, and his face drained. The black raincoat swallowed him like fog; the barman doused the lights to move the drinkers; three men staggered to the bar for a last order. The lights blazed. The man and the boy were gone. The two remaining teenagers exchanged glances, then made for the door, which was swinging itself into place. Outside the disturbed mist swirled and closed again.

When Val returned to the flat she ripped October from the calendar. Each month was an overlapping pictured strip, from January fragments of cardboard flesh had matured into a girl, and in June fingers had begun to take shape around her. Val knew that in December great male hands would clutch her, carrying her into an unknown New Year. For a week in February she'd meant to tear up the calendar; now, still remembering whose present it had been, she treasured it to show that she'd survived. She leaned on a creaking cane chair and said goodnight to Mick Jagger on the wall, to the tambourine hanging above the tv set.

Jane was asleep. Val drew the curtains softly to admit intimations of light. As she undressed she remembered meeting Jane. A party somewhere, each room with its function, drinking in the kitchen, dancing in the lounge which led to the bedroom; she'd glanced in at the dancing silhouettes and recoiled, terrified because she would never know them. She'd retreated to the kitchen, looking for a glass, and Jane had found her one, saying "You must be like me—a friend of a friend of a friend." On the pillow Jane's face lay, smoothed out like Val's sheets. Two boys had hurried into the kitchen, glasses at the ready. "My God, she was randy," one was saying. "She really was. Bloody randy." "I think I'd better go," Val had said. "My parents will be wondering." "Mine too," Jane had replied. "And I'm at the University, for heaven's sake. If only I could find someone to share a flat—" Val had thought of her parents, they'd retreated behind solidified homilies, she no longer knew them—at least something between them reflected back her determination to preserve her identity, whatever that might be. "I might," she'd told Jane.

As Val stood at the window for a last taste of the night she looked up at the next house one floor above, a man's silhouette moved in a bright frame. He might be reflected from the flat upstairs—but no, impossible, that flat was

empty; he was beyond a door in the building opposite. Val intended to explore upstairs some day in daylight. She crept into bed, thinking momentarily of Len in the pub: a suburban home, early to bed except when he was reading books on office management and economics. He'd no doubt go far, she thought. And the dark man, where was he? Kicked by the teenagers, he might have crawled home to his flat, a whisky from the cabinet to steady him, standing perhaps on a Persian carpet. But something told her he wasn't the one who'd been hurt. He'd beckoned her to worlds of night, cars sweeping down still lanes to a golden country club, and onward to a city glimpsed from a hill at midnight, swarming with far neon fireflies. She was envious, but she slept.

Next day at the office Len caught her eye and smiled tentatively. She smiled back and looking away, hurried between the desks like territories to the Ladies' Before the mirror she raised one eyebrow; she'd perfected that control and thought it effective. That night at the flat she repeated the performance, and Jane replied: "Someone called for you while you were out."

"What was he like?"

"Italian type " Jane was turning a record cover in her hands; its overlapping three-dimensional photograph shifted slowly but never quite met the eye. "I said I didn't know when you'd be back."

"Bitch Anyway I don't know who he was, I don't care " One of these days, Val thought, they'd fight over a man.

They were behind with the rent; next night Val worked late. The top deck of the bus home was empty. She sat in front, watching Lower Brichester as it passed. A sports car swept by, its driver's hair combed by the wind, and at once had left her behind. On the edge of the pavement trees moist with mist rushed toward her; overhanging branches beat the roof like whips toward which flew the bus. At the approach of the bus the packed leaves crawled like insects; as they came close they were tiered by the reflected interior of the bus. Suddenly Val sat forward. The last reflection was printed on her eyes, a dark face, blurred into a coconut by memory, above a seat behind her.

Sheets of sodium light turned through the bus like pages, the conductor was swept forward, playing castanets of change. Val spilled her coins. She groped beneath the seat, ashamed and yet not, she willed him not to go downstairs. She paid. For a moment she struggled to engage him in conversation, but too late; he retreated. Shivering, she dared to turn. She was alone on the top deck, its poles gleamed clinically, a single curl of cigarette-smoke floated in the cold air. She was still afraid. If she followed the conductor

downstairs now he'd wonder what was wrong. She stood and ran toward the stairs. As she passed the seat where she'd seemed to see the face she stretched out her hand and touched the leather. It was cold as the stones of a well.

A glass was held toward her, half-full of some dark liquid. Her eye refused to look beyond the hand which held the glass. Then she saw that it was not a glass; it was a girl, struggling among the fingers, one bare arm thrust out beneath the thumb. Nor was it a hand which held her.

Val sat up in bed. The mist which had walled up the window seemed to have seeped into the room; the furniture was grey and formless. She peered toward Jane's bed. What she could make out was not reassuring; Jane was lying oddly, twisted, shrunken. Val called to her. She didn't answer. The blankets warmed Val's legs, suggesting that she snuggle and forget. She pulled the light-cord. Jane's bed was empty.

The room withdrew from her; she felt isolated with something unknown, hostile. Beyond the tangle of Jane's bed a hairbrush bristled with translucent insect legs. Where was Jane? How little Val knew of her—out of sight all day at the University, brittle as crystal at parties, only displaying occasional facets at breakfast or tea, calling "Good night then" before they slept, for all Val knew she might betray her to what Val sensed pursuing. It was the night and silence which mused, Val told herself, not her. She found her slippers and got up to look for Jane, they'd make coffee and talk for a while.

The hall was empty. Val tiptoed downstairs, the bathroom was on the ground floor back. As she reached the hall a passing car dragged rectangles of light across her breasts, the shadow of the hall stand rose up and tapered. She'd wait in the flat instead, she decided. Something gave a raw cry, one of the cats which the old lady in the ground floor flat collected, Val told herself, stumbling upstairs.

As she reached their floor she thought she heard movement above her. Could Jane be in the top room? If so, what was she doing? Unwillingly Val climbed and stood before the door, it was inlaid with panels of darkness. She reached for the doorknob. As she did so she thought: suppose when she grasped the knob it was turned from inside? Beneath the door lay a wedge of blackness, like negative light. It wouldn't show if someone was moving toward her. She recoiled and felt the stairwell at her back. Whirling, she ran downstairs.

Beneath their flat door showed the same wedge of darkness. She stood between the hostile room above and the wails below, afraid of what she might find. Then she plunged into the flat and turned on the light.

In bed Jane blinked. "Where were you?" Val asked harshly.

"The bathroom," Jane said, and turned over.

In the morning Val was jealous. Of course Jane hadn't met a man last night, but it was as if she had: she was capable of giving that impression. "Damn," Jane said, entering the kitchen in her housecoat. "I've lost a stocking."

Val poured the milk for coffee. She was determined to outdo Jane. "I was nearly engaged last year, did I ever tell you?" she remarked. "He was a student. He gave me that calendar."

"What happened?"

Val wished she hadn't started. "My parents said we couldn't afford to marry. After a while I saw they were right."

"So? You could have gone to live with him."

"I couldn't. I wasn't ready."

"At the University they all sleep together now and then. It doesn't mean anything."

"I've left a cup in the front room," Val said, and went to stand before the calendar. Two months and there'd be nothing of him left.

When she returned to the kitchen Jane was leafing through a fashion magazine. "I couldn't wear gloves," Jane said. "I'd feel suffocated."

"Nobody's asking you to," Val told her.

Val didn't go to the pub that lunchtime; she didn't feel able to support a conversation. As the others donned their coats Tony called to her and Len, who was sitting at a desk nearby with a book propped by his sandwiches. "I've got an open invite to a party tonight if you're free."

"All right," Val said. "I'll try and get my flat-mate to come."

"Thanks anyway," Len answered. "I'm behind with my correspondence course."

The door closed and laughter faded. Val watched Len as she turned the pages of her fashion magazine. Planes of air stood between them, flat as the desks. He glanced up at her. "Good Lord, you must be hungry," he said. "Have a sandwich."

"That's sweet," Val said.

He remained on the edge of his book. "I see you're going out with that man you met at Tony's twenty-first," he muttered.

Val stared at him. "No, Len, why?"

"Didn't I see him waiting for you outside here? The day after Tony's party?"

"I don't know," Val said. "I think he's been following me. I'm frightened, Len."

"Good God." Len came over to her. "If you want me to I'll phone the police."

"I don't know who he is. I may be completely wrong."

"I drive near your place on my way to work, I think. If you like—What I'm trying to say, I could give you a lift."

Val's eyebrow lifted. "I'd like you to," she said.

"Tony's invited us to a party tonight," Val told Jane at tea.

Jane raked the scraps into a newspaper. "I'm going out tonight," she said.

"I wish you'd tell me where you're going sometimes."

"Look, Val," Jane remonstrated, "we share a flat, we don't share each other. Why don't you find yourself a man?"

Furious, Val drank more heavily that night than she'd intended. Eventually, sharper than the other fragments of the party—a girl trying to support herself with a shining set of fire-irons which clattered wide and spread a silence, a group gazing up at a painted cavalier, throats taut and gulping Pimm's between slow comments—she discovered that one man had been replenishing her glass. mauve shirt, veteran-car tie-pin, horn rimmed glasses. He was leading her toward the door, several couples were lying on the carpet.

"It's becoming disgusting," the man said—but his hands were already cupped toward her. "I know a country club not far from here."

"Thanks, but it's getting late," Val said. "I must be leaving in a minute."

"Never mind. I'll run you home."

"It's kind of you to offer." But Len wouldn't clutch her, she thought suddenly, he'd be gentle, shy enough to woo her—she'd read his expression when he'd driven her home earlier. "My fiancé is calling for me," she said.

"You might have told me sooner."

But she hadn't known sooner. As she waited for the last bus she could see above a football ground on the horizon blue interlocked bars of light, harsh as the razor-edged November night. The night, however, only met the alcohol which weaved within her, it didn't purge her. The bus arrived, she was amused when its poles slid from her hands. She sat upstairs. On the sharp glittering pavements lights peered through leaves which rippled, sometimes forming into what might have been a face. Val was warm, imagining the flat ahead, she had an idea.

Her warmth decided for her. It would be her mystery, something to withhold from Jane. Tomorrow she'd tell Len, he might admire her for it, or he might be angry, upset that she'd risked herself, that would be pleasant too.

When she reached the flat, climbing past a purring shadow on the ground floor, she raced to the top door.

Before it she quietened for a moment, listening. Their flat had been dark, the building held its breath with her. The door was indistinguishable from the gap of darkness within. She caught hold of the cold doorknob; it seemed to move beneath her fingers. She laughed and opened the door.

It merged with the darkness. Ahead she saw a grey rectangle; between the houses opposite she could see cranes, their distant heads dipping like dinosaur skeletons. The sky flared pink. On the floor something caught the color and faded; next to it she made out a huddled shape. Reaching behind the door, she found the light-switch.

The room leapt like the closing walls of a toy house. The walls were bare; in the corners of the ceiling a few triangles of flowered wallpaper had resisted stripping; the bare boards stretched to the plaster. She entered, and a figure moved toward her. It was herself, projected on the window opposite.

From there her eyes found the boards beneath the window. Dust hung about her feet like ground-mist, but where she looked a rectangle of board was defined. It must have been a trunk; whoever had lived here last had taken it with him. He'd left only a crumpled grey blanket spread on newspapers, and two wine-glasses. Val felt disappointed, the room had been drained of danger. Then she saw that the glasses held dregs. She stooped to examine the crimson globule in each, and on the floor between them and the blanket saw the imprint of a hand. No, it couldn't be; to lie like that it must have been boneless. Someone had dropped a glove.

For no reason that she could discover, this did for her what the night could not: the alcohol evaporated, and she chilled. She turned to leave. Then, among the folds of the blanket, she noticed something tangled as if suffocated. She didn't want to touch the blanket. But there was no need. From what she could see between the folds she had guessed what it was. It was Jane's lost stocking.

When she'd locked the door of their flat she sat upright on a chair in the front room. She moved the clock away from the window. Glancing about for something, anything, to distract her, she caught sight of the fingers closing around the girl. She leapt up and tore the calendar to shreds. Then she watched for the hands of the clock to crawl. Behind her the upstairs window was reflected, if the light was on. She thought of Len asleep, she thought of Jane's face when she'd said she had been to the bathroom, and what her face had masked. She knew she'd never see Jane again. By dawn she'd have made her choice; but now, while the night surrounded her and the alcohol swam back, she didn't know what she might do if she heard footsteps descending the stairs: barricade the door, or simply sit and wait.

Errol Undercliffe : a tribute

Errol Undercliffe is a Brixhester writer whose work has only recently begun to reach a wider public. Apparently a recluse, he often wrote for the Brixhester fanzine *Spirited*, whose editors, however, never met him. Rumour has it that he spoke on a literary panel at the Brixhester Fantasy Convention in 1965, but a photograph taken of him on that occasion has yet to be traced. In 1967, aged about 30, he disappeared after an attempt at amateur psychical research. His stories, most of them contemporary treatments of traditional macabre themes, have been edited into an omnibus collection, *Photographed by Lightning*, and the Korean film director Harry Chang, an Undercliffe admirer of long standing, has completed a triptych film of his stories, *Red Dreams*.

THE FRANKLYN PARAGRAPHS

The disappearance of Errol Undercliffe in 1967 from his flat in Lower Brixhester was not widely reported. The little speculation provoked by the mystery was soon resolved by the belief that Undercliffe had "disappeared" in search of publicity. While he has not reappeared, his public seems still to be waiting for him to produce himself out of a hat. At the time I hinted in print that I could supply evidence of something more sinister, but I fear that the general branding of Undercliffe as charlatan was sufficiently persuasive to dissuade me from publishing evidence in case Undercliffe reappeared and objected to my making public letters written privately to me. By now, however, I should be more than pleased if Undercliffe declared both his absence and his last letter a hoax.

Undercliffe first wrote to me in 1965, when my first book had just become available from Brixhester Central Library. Typically, he enclosed a cutting from the letter-column of the *Brixhester Herald*, under the heading "Can Ghost Stories be Libellous?" one "Countryman" had written. "I have recently perused a book of ghost stories by a Mr J. Ramsey Campbell, mainly located in Brixhester. Mr Campbell seems to look upon the citizens of our town as either witches, warlocks, or illiterate 'country folks'. The advertising for the book makes much of the fact that the author is still an infant, since this is obvious from the contents, I would scarcely have thought it necessary to advertise the fact. I would suggest that before he writes another such book Mr Campbell should (1) visit Brixhester, where he has clearly never set foot, and (2) grow up." And so on. I could have replied that on the basis of my several visits to Brixhester I didn't consider it the sort of town where I'd care to spend a night, but I find this kind of letter-column deal a little childish, and didn't feel

disposed to join swords or even pens. For the record, these days Brichester has an impressively mundane surface, but I still sense that it may crack. When I and Kirby McCauley passed through the area in 1965, a month or so before Undercliffe's first letter, I was disturbed to be unable to find the turn-off to Severnford and Brichester, and the groups of youths inert in the sun outside a shack-like cinema in Berkeley (showing, oddly enough, Jerry Lewis' one horror film) proved less than helpful. Hours later, after dark, we were directed by a roundabout policeman, but without conferring we sneaked around the roundabout—only to find ourselves somehow on the road originally indicated and to stay at an inn whose sign we discovered in the dawn to be that of a goat!

However, I digress. I quote the letter from the *Herald* at length because it seems to me to demonstrate some aspects of Undercliffe's character; not that he wrote it (at least I shouldn't think so), but he did enclose it with his first letter to me, though it is hardly the sort of enclosure most of us would choose when initiating a correspondence. However, Undercliffe's sense of humor was wry—some might call it cynical or cruel. I'm inclined to believe it was the product of a basic insecurity, from what little I know of his life. I never visited him, and his letters were rarely self-revelatory (though the first of the batch here published is more so than he might have wished). Most of them were first drafts of stories, signed and dated, he kept a copy of every letter he wrote—these were carefully filed in his flat—and several of the incidents which he described to me in the two years of our correspondence turned up virtually verbatim in his short stories. In particular the description of the disused station in *The Through Train* was lifted bodily from his letter to me of 20 November 1966.

If this says little about the man himself, I can only maintain that for the rest of us Errol Undercliffe was the Mr Arkadin of the horror-story world. "Errol Undercliffe" was almost certainly not his christened name. His refusal to provide biographical detail was not as notorious as J. D. Salinger's, but it was fully as obsessive. He seems to have been educated in or near Brichester (see the first letter here) but I cannot trace his school, nor the friend whose engagement party he describes. I never saw a photograph of him. Perhaps he thought the aura of mystery with which he surrounded himself carried over to his stories, perhaps, again, he was bent on preserving his own isolation. If so, he served himself ill as far as his final ordeal was concerned, he had nobody to whom he could turn.

When I went down to Undercliffe's flat on hearing that he'd disappeared, I

was less surprised than saddened by the experience. The Lower Brixton area, as I've mentioned elsewhere, is the sort of miniature cosmopolis one finds in most major English towns: three-storey houses full of errant lodgers, curtains as varied as flags at a conference but more faded, the occasional smashed pane, the frequent furtive watchers. Somebody was tuning a motorcycle in Pitt Street, and the fumes drifted into Undercliffe's flat through a crack in the pane and clouded the page in his typewriter. The landlady was making ready to dispose of this, together with Undercliffe's books and other possessions, as soon as the rent gave out at the end of the month. I finally persuaded her to let me handle the disposal, after a good deal of wrangling and invocation of August Derleth (who'd never published Undercliffe), the Arts Council (who'd never heard of him, I imagine) and others. Having ushered her out at last, well aware that she'd be prepared to search me before I left the house, I examined the flat. The wardrobe and chest-of-drawers contained two suits, some shirts and so forth, none of which could have looked particularly stylish at an engagement party. The bed commanded a fine view of an arachnidial crack in the ceiling (clearly that crack which "suddenly, with a horrid lethargy, detached itself from the plaster and fell on Peter's upturned face" in *The Man Who Feared to Sleep*). The wallpaper had a Charlotte Perkins Gilman look; once Undercliffe complained that "such an absurd story should have used up an inspiration which I could work into one of my best tales." The window looked out on the fuming motorcycle, now stuck stubbornly in first gear, and its fuming owner, at night I suppose Undercliffe, seated at his typewriter before the window, might have waved to the girl slipping off her slip in the flat across the street, and I carried on his neighborly gesture, though without much success. On the sill outside his window cigarette stubs had collected like bird droppings, he tended to cast these into the night, disliking the sight of a brimming ashtray. He'd go through a packet per thousand words, he once told me, he'd tried chewing gum once, but this drew his fillings, and he was terrified of the dentist (cf. *The Dream*). All this, of course, is trivial, but I needed—still need—distraction. I'd already followed Undercliffe's search through the first three letters printed here, and that page still in the typewriter—a letter to me, probably the last thing he wrote—told of what he found. I removed it, unwillingly enough, and left, the landlady let it go. Later I arranged for transportation of the contents of the flat. The books—which seemed to be Undercliffe's treasured possessions, books of horror stories bought with the profits from his horror stories, a sad and lonely

vicious circle—are now held in trust by the British Science Fiction Association library; the rest is in storage. I wish more than ever that Undercliffe would come forward to claim them.

Undercliffe's first letter to me (15 October 1965) contains a passage which in retrospect seems informed by a macabre irony. "The implicit theme of your story *The Insects from Shaggai*," he writes, "is interesting, but you never come to grips with the true point of the plot: the horror-story author who is skeptical of the supernatural and finally is faced with overwhelming evidence of its reality. What would be his reaction? Certainly not to write of 'the lurid glow which shines on the razor lying on the table before me'!" This is as unlikely as the ending of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. I'd be interested to hear whether you yourself believe in what you write. For myself, I think the fact that I take great pains to check material on the supernatural here in our Central Library is eloquent enough. By the way, have you come across Roland Franklyn's *We Pass from View*? The author is a local man who has some quite arresting theories about reincarnation and the like."

Which brings us to Franklyn and *We Pass from View*, in themselves as mysterious as the fate of Undercliffe, but I suspect that the two mysteries are interdependent, that one explains the other—if indeed one wishes to probe for explanation. Before discussing Franklyn, however, I'd like to note some of Undercliffe's work; I feel obliged to bring it to the notice of a wider public. His favorites of his own work were *The Drains* (the blood of a bygone murder drips from the cold tap), *The Carved Desk* (the runes carved on what was once a Druid tree call up something which claws at the ankles of anyone foolish enough to sit down to write), and *The Drifting Face* (never published originally intended for the ill fated second issue of *Alien Worlds*, it now cannot be traced). I favor his more personal, less popular work *The Window in the Fog* (in which the narrator's glimpses of a girl across the street mount to an obsessive pitch until he accosts her one night and rebuffed, murders her), *The Steeple on the Hill* (where a writer fond of lonely walks is followed by the members of a cult, is eventually drawn within their circle and becomes the incarnation of their god), and *The Man Who Feared to Sleep*, which lent its title (*Peur de Sommeil* in France) to Undercliffe's best collection, under the imprint of that excellent publisher who rediscovered such writers as Pursewarden and Sebastian Knight and made again available Robert Blake's legendary collection *The Stairs in the Crypt*. It is amusing to note that the entire contents of Undercliffe's collection—including the title story, which is surely a study of insanity—was listed under "Supernatural Phenomena" in the H. W. Wilson

Short Story Index (in an earlier volume than that which placed my own *Church in High Street* under "Church Entertainments", making it sound like a parish farce or a Britten mystery play). Undercliffe was latterly working on a script for Delta Film Productions, but producer Harry Nadler reports that this was never completed, nor was his story *Through the Zone of the Colossi*, a metaphysical piece based on a reference in my *Mine on Yuggoth* coupled with material from *We Pass from View*.

Which brings me back to the necessity of discussing Franklyn's book, a duty which I fear I've been avoiding. I've never seen the book, but I have little desire to do so. I refrained from consulting Brichester Central Library's copy when I went to Undercliffe's flat, I suppose I could obtain this through the National Central Library, though I suspect that in fact the copy (like all others, apparently) has mysteriously disappeared.

Although, as Undercliffe points out, *We Pass from View* displays marked affinities with the Cthulhu Mythos in certain passages, such Lovecraft scholars as Derleth, Lin Carter, Timothy d'Arch Smith and J. Vernon Shea can supply no information on the book. I understand that it was published in 1964 by the "True Light Press", Brichester; references in Undercliffe's letters suggest that it was a duplicated publication, originally circulated in card covers but probably bound by libraries taking copies. I have not been able to discover where, if anywhere, it was on sale. An odd rumor reached me recently that almost the entire edition was stolen from the "True Light Press"—actually the house of Roland Franklyn—and has not been heard of since, perhaps destroyed, but by whom?

Here is the little information I've obtained from various sources. The British National Bibliography gives the following entry:

129.4—Incarnation and reincarnation

FRANKLYN, Ronald

We pass from View. Brichester, True Light Press, 9/6 Jan 1964. 126 p. 22 cm.

However, the Cumulative Book Index, which lists all books published in English, does not acknowledge the book, at least, neither I nor the staff of Liverpool's Picton Library can trace the reference.

While correlating notes I was surprised to turn up in my commonplace book the following review, which might have been copied from the *Times Literary Supplement*:

PSEUDOPODDITIES

The last few decades have seen the emergence of many disturbing pseudo-philosophies, but *We Pass from View* must rank lowest. The author, Roland Franklyn, has less idea of style than most of his kind, however, the ideas behind the writing are expressed with less ambiguity than one might wish. His basic thesis seems to be that the number of souls in the universe is limited, by some illegitimate application of the conservation of energy principle, and that humanity must therefore acknowledge an infinite number of simultaneous incarnations. The last chapter, *Toward the True Self*, is a sort of reductio ad absurdum of the theory, concluding that the "true self" is to be found "outside space", and that each human being is merely a facet of his "self", which is itself able to experience all its incarnations simultaneously but unable to control them. There is a suggestion of Beckett here (particularly *L'Innomable*), and Mr Franklyn has infused enough unconscious humour into many passages to cause hilarity when the book was read aloud at a party. But a book which advocates the use of drugs to achieve fulfilment of black-magical rites is worth attention not so much as humour (and certainly not as it was intended) as a sociological phenomenon.

Laughter at a party, indeed! I still find that remark rather frightening. What copy was being read aloud? The TLS review copy, perhaps, but in that case what happened to it? Like so much in this affair, the end fades into mystery. I doubt that many indignant letters replied to the review, those that were written probably weren't printable. In 1966, I heard vaguely of a book called *How I Discovered my Infinite Self* by "An Initiate", but whether it was ever published I don't know.

Undercliffe quoted several passages from *We Pass from View* which, though I find them faintly distasteful, I had better include. I still have all of Undercliffe's letters, some day I may edit them into a memorial article for *The Arkham Collector*, but it seems in rather bad taste to write a memoir of a man who may still be alive somewhere. The letters printed here are, I think, essential.

In his letter of 2 November 1965 Undercliffe wrote "Here's a bizarre passage which might set you off on a short story. From the first page of *We Pass from View*: 'The novice must remind himself always that the Self is infinite and that he is but one part of his Self, not yet aware of his other bodies and lives. REMIND YOURSELF on sleeping. REMIND YOURSELF on waking. Above all, REMIND YOURSELF when entering the First Stage of

Initiation'. As for this first stage, I've traced references later in the text, but nothing very lucid. Franklyn keeps mentioning 'the aids' which seem to be drugs of some sort, usually taken under supervision of an 'initiate' who chants invocations ('Ag'lak Sauron, Daoloth asgl'i, Eihort phul'aag'—that ought to ring a bell with you) and attempts to tap the novice's subconscious knowledge of his other incarnations. Not that I necessarily believe what Franklyn says, but it certainly gives you that sense of instability which all good horror stories should provide. I can't discover much about Franklyn. He seems in the last year or two to have drawn together a circle of young men who, from what I hear, visit Goatswood, Clotton, Temphill, the island beyond Severnford, and other places in which you're no doubt as interested as I am. I'd like to get in on the act."

I replied that he surely didn't need drugs for inspiration and that, warnings from Dennis Wheatley aside, I didn't feel it was advisable to become involved in black magic. "Experience makes the writer," Undercliffe retorted. Subsequently he avoided direct quotation, but I gathered he had not joined Franklyn's circle; his own decision, I think. Then, in September 1966, when he was writing *The Crawling in the Attic* (I'd just started library work and sent him the manuscript of *The Stocking* to read, which he didn't like—"elaborately pointless"), he quoted the following:

"Today's psychologists are wrong about dreams coming from the subconscious mind. Dreams are the links between us and the experiences of our other incarnations. *We must be receptive to them.* TELL YOURSELF BEFORE YOU SLEEP THAT YOU WILL SEE BEYOND YOUR FACET. The initiate known as Yokh'khim, his name on Tond, came to me describing a dream of long tunnels in which he was pursued but could not see his body. After several sessions, he managed to see himself as a ball of hair rolling through the tunnel away from the Trunks in the Ooze. The ball was known on Tond as Yokh'khim. He has not attained the stage of Black Initiate and spends his time beyond his facet, having set aside all but the minimum of his life on Earth."

I hadn't much to say to that except to suggest that Franklyn had plagiarized the "Tond" reference, provoking Undercliffe to reply "Surely Franklyn has undermined your complacency enough to make complaints about copyright a little trivial. Anyway, no doubt he'd point out that you knew of Tond through your dreams." I couldn't decide whether his tongue was in his cheek, I passed over his comment, and our correspondence fell off somewhat.

In February 1967 he quoted a passage which is significant indeed. "What

about a story of a writer who haunts his own books?" he suggested. "Franklyn has a paragraph on ghosts: 'The death of a body does not mean that the soul will leave it. This depends on whether there is an incarnation for it to pass into. If not, the body continues to be inhabited until it is destroyed. The initiate knows that Edgar Allan Poe's fear of premature burial was well-founded. If the death is violent, then it is more difficult than ever for the soul to leave. FOR HIS OWN SAFETY, THE INITIATE MUST INSIST ON CREMATION. Otherwise he will be hopelessly attracted back to Earth, and the burrowers of the core may drag off his body from the grave with him still in it to the feast of Eihort.'"

Interesting, I said somewhat wearily. I was rather tired of this sort of verbal delirium. On 5 July 1967 Undercliffe reported that the *Bri. Chester Herald* had noted Franklyn's death. This meant little to me at the time. Then came the final sequence of letters.

7 Pitt Street : Lower Brichester, Glos : 14 July 1967 1 03 a.m.

slightly intoxicated

Dear JRC:

Always this point at a party where the beer tastes like vomit. Pretty putrid party, actually. Friend of mine from school who got engaged and sent me an invite. Can't think why, I'd just about forgotten him myself, but I wanted to meet him again. Didn't get near. Great fat bluebottle of a woman he got engaged to pawing over him all evening and wanting to be kissed, messily at that, whenever he tried to act the host. Good luck say I. So I had to make my own way round the conversations. I just don't know where he got them from. All bow ties and "God, Bernard, surely you realize the novel is absolutely *dead*" and banging down tankards of ale which they'd bought to be all boys together, sloshing them over and making little lakes down these trestle tables in the Co-op Hall (another blow for the old town and the Brichester folks—our engaged friend kept patting his bluebottle and bellowing "I had a wonderful childhood in Brichester, absolutely wonderful, they're fine people", no Palm Court for *him*.) Whole place murky with smoke and some tin band playing in the fog. Hundreds of ashtrays surrounded by those pieces of ash like dead flies. Finally our friend fell to his feet to give thanks for "all the superb presents", which didn't make me feel any more accepted, since I hadn't known it was done to bring one. I feel a little

Better. Repartee: the morning after. Beg pardon, I shouldn't have mentioned engagements and fiancées. Still, I'm sure you're better off. Writers

always bloom better with elbow room. I have your letter by me. You're right, your last argument with your girlfriend in Lime Street Station cafeteria with bare tables, balls of cellophane and someone next to you trying not to listen—it'd never come off in print, even though it happened to you they'd be sure to scream Graham Greene was here first. And then her calling down "I love you" through the rain before her mother dragged her back from her window—yes, it's very poignant, but you'll have to rewrite before you can print. More on our wavelength, what you say about this other girl running out of your haunted Hornby Library in panic certainly sounds promising. You going to lock yourself in there overnight? I'd give a lot for a genuine supernatural experience.

There was this idiot at the party wanting to know what I did. Horror stories I said. Should have seen him blanch. "Why do you write those things?" he asked as if he'd caught me picking my nose. "For the money," I said. A young couple sliding down the wall behind us laughed. Great, an audience I thought. No doubt if I'd said I wasn't joking they'd have laughed harder. "No, but seriously" said this poor man's F. R. Leavis (you couldn't write for anything as base as money, you see) "would you not agree that the writer is a sort of Christ figure who suffers in order to cohere his suffering for the reader's benefit?" The extent of his suffering was his bank manager calling him on his overdraft, I'll bet. "And don't you think the horror story coheres (I wasn't cohering myself by that time) an experience?" "Are you telling me you believe in what you write?" he demanded as if it'd been *Mein Kampf*. "You don't think I'd write something in which I didn't believe?" I retorted, carefully placing the preposition. The young couple left; the show was over. He stalked off to tell Bernard about me.

At least the streets were clean and empty. Remarkable girl in the flat across the street. You should come down. Anyway, to bed. Tomorrow to work on *Through the Zone of the Colossi* and check the library.

Best,

EU

Pitt of Hell Lowest Brixchester, Glos · 14 July 1967 later!

Dear JRC:

I don't normally write twice in a day. Today's events, however, are too important to let fade. I have had my experience. It will unquestionably form into a short story, so forgive me this first draft. I trust you not to use it.

Today, as anticipated, I visited the library. After last night/this morning, I felt somewhat sick, but that's the penance. On the bus I was trying to cohere

Zone of the Colossi, but they wouldn't let me; you must know how it is. Half the passengers were ducking and screaming beneath the flight of a wasp, and the other half were sitting stoically pouring forth clouds of tobacco-smoke, which curled in the hot air. I sat next to some whistling fool and my thoughts kept getting sidetracked into a search for the lyrics in order to fit them to his tune and be rid of it. Not an auspicious start, but *Zones of the Colossi* was forgotten when I left the library. I couldn't find *We Pass from View* on the shelf in the Religion section; mind you, some cretin in an aged mac was pottering round the shelves and sampling books and replacing them at whatever position he'd pottered to, earning himself glares from the staff. Someone else had erected a fortress of books on one of the tables and behind it was completing his football coupon. He cursed me visibly when I examined his barricade; I've rarely felt so self-conscious as then, his gaze on my canted head. But there it was *We Pass from View* beneath *The Mass in Slow Motion* and *The Catholic Marriage Manual* and Graham Fisher's *Identity and Awareness*. I pulled out the foundation, but the wall held.

The book was bound in bright blue. The table-top was pastel green. The room was warm and sunny, if a little stifling. At the further end, behind a creamy desk, one of the staff was recounting his adventures in a branch library, how he'd been plagued by old ladies pleading for what he called "cheap novelettes"; I could tell he looked upon all fiction as the poor relation of non-fiction, like all academic librarians -so much for our writing. You couldn't get further from a Lovecraft setting, but then this was the real thing.

I turned back the cover; it slapped the table top. Silence fell. A blade of sunlight moved along the floor, intensifying cracks. Then the pages of *We Pass from View* began to turn of their own accord.

At first I thought it must be a draught. When you're sitting in a bright new library among books and people you don't think of the possibility of the supernatural. When the book exhibits traces of its readership (chewing-gum on one page, a dead fly on another) it's difficult to view it as haunted. And yet I couldn't take my eyes from those moving pages. They turned up the dedication ("to my faithful friends") and for a second, as though my vision were failing, I saw lines of some other print waver as if superimposed on the text. The page turned to the next, a blank leaf. I put out my hand, but I couldn't quite bring myself to touch the book. As I hesitated, lines of print appeared on the blank paper.

HELP ME

It stood out starkly on the paper, next to the fingerprint of some unclean

reader. HELP ME. The letters held for several seconds: great black capitals which seemed to burn my eyeballs as I stared at them. And I was overwhelmed by the sense of an appeal, of someone trying desperately to contact me. Then they blurred and faded.

FEEL SOMEONE READING MUST BE

That flashed and disappeared, I read it in a second. The room seemed airless, I was sweating, my ribs were closing on my lungs. I could see only the book open on the table and feel a terrible, tortuous strain, as of a mind in torment trying to communicate its suffering.

SHE HAD ME BURIED HER REVENGE TOLD HER
CREMATE BITCH WOMEN CANT TRUST HELP ME

That HELP ME was molten.

FEEL THEM COMING SLOWLY BURROWING WANT ME
TO SUFFER CANT MOVE GET ME OUT SAVE
ME SOMEWHERE IN BRICHESTER HELP ME

And the page, which had been lifted trembling, fell back. I waited. The room assembled round me in the merciless sunlight. The page remained blank. I don't know how long I waited. At last it occurred to me that the setting was wrong, back in my room I might be able to re-establish contact. I picked up the book—holding it rather gingerly; somehow I expected to feel it move, struggle between my fingers—and carried it to the desk and back into mundanity.

"I'm afraid this is a reference copy only," said the girl at the desk, flashing a smile and her engagement ring at me.

I told her that it seemed to be their only copy and that there were various of my books in the fiction section and that I knew the chief librarian (well, I'd glimpsed him enthroned in his office as someone bore in his coffee the day I was invited by his secretary to sign my books). I could have told her that I felt the book throbbing in my hand. But she replied "Well, *personally* I know we can trust you with it and if it were up to me I'd let you have it, but—" and much more of the I'm-only-doing-my-job speech. I set the book down on the desk in order to wave my hands about and she handed it to a girl who was replacing books on the shelves, belatedly asking "You didn't want it again, did you?"

I saw it carried away on the toppling pile, already the transcendental was being erased by the mundane, Franklyn would be filed carefully and forgotten. And that showed me what I must do. Of course I knew that it was Franklyn whose paragraphs I had been reading from beyond the grave, indeed, from in

the grave. But I didn't know how to find him. The *Brixester Herald* had given neither his address nor where he was buried. "Do you know anything about Roland Franklyn himself?" I enquired.

"Yes, he used to come in quite often . . ." but she obviously didn't want to talk about it. "Eric, don't let Mary do all the clearing," she said to her companion at the desk, who was building a house of holiday postcards.

"Franklyn, the little queer in the cloak?" he addressed me. "You're not a friend of his, are you? Good job. Used to come in here with a whole crowd of them, the Twelve Disciples we used to call them. One of them came up to the desk one day because we were talking about his master and waved his great emaciated fist at us—you could see the drugs running out of his eyes. Why are you interested in that queer? Can't think what attracted them all, what with that moth-eaten cloak and that huge bald head—he'd probably pulled out the last few hairs to stick on that spidery beard. He had a wife too, I think—must've been before he came to the crossroads. What's the matter, Mary, you want me to rupture myself?"

"Do you know where he lived?" I stayed him.

"Bottom of Mercy Hill. House looked like Satan was in residence. You can't miss it." He knocked down the house of cards and walked away, and so, feeling rather adrift, did I.

I suppose I could have tried to find Franklyn today, but I wanted to crystallize the experience, to preserve it before it lost its form. I came home and set this down, I think it needs rewriting. Reality always does, I suppose we have to give it some form, even while paying the price of distortion. I keep thinking of Franklyn in his coffin, aware of something tunnelling toward him, unable to move a muscle but still capable of feelings. But it's dark now, I couldn't find him in the dark. Tomorrow, more. Goodbye, girl in the window.

EU

a fixed point : 15 July 1967

Dear JRC:

Today has been disturbing.

I knew Franklyn lived on Mercy Hill, but the Hill covers a lot of ground, I couldn't search it for his house. Finally I thought of the street directory—odd I didn't think of that before—and called at the library today to check. There was only one R. Franklyn on Mercy Hill. I did return to the Religion section but they couldn't find *We Pass from View*; I suppose they're classifying me as one of their regular cranks.

I caught a bus to Mercy Hill. High sun, slight breeze, a bluebottle was

patting its reflexion on the window, trying to escape. In the streets couples were taking their ice-creams for a walk; toward the Hill tennis balls were punctuating their pauses, girls were leaping, bowls were clicking, and from the houses behind a procession was bearing trays of cakes to the pavilion. It was one of those days when if anything is to happen you have to make it happen; or for me to complete the next episode of my short story.

I dismounted at the foot of the Hill and climbed the piled terraces. At one corner they were erecting a new school; workmen were sunning themselves on girders. Two levels further up I came into Dee Terrace, and at once saw Franklyn's house.

It was unmistakeable. The personality which gave that house its final form was not the architect's. One chimney had been built into a frustum of white stone; an extra room had been added on the left, and its window had been blocked with newer brick; all the curtains, except those of one ground-floor window draped in green, were black. The house looked deserted, the more so for its garden, which could not have been tended in years; grass and weeds grew knee high. I brushed through, imagining things crawling into my shoes. A bustling cloud of flies rose from something to one side. I reached the front door and saw the green curtain move; a face peered and drew back. I knocked. There was silence for a moment. Then inside a woman's voice screamed "Oh, lie down with you!" Before I could ponder on that, the door was open.

The woman was certainly not in mourning—which was encouraging, for I hadn't known quite what approach to make. She wore a red dress, which looked pale against the crimson wallpaper of the hall. She was heavily, if inaccurately, made up, and her hair was rather arbitrarily bleached. She waited "Would you be Mrs. Franklyn?"

She looked suspicious, as if I'd intended a threat. "Roland Franklyn was my husband," she admitted ungraciously. "Who are you?"

Who indeed. It didn't seem as though I'd get far by declaring the supernatural nature of my quest. "I'm a writer," I compromised. "I've read your husband's book several times. I was shocked to hear of his death," I added to get it over with.

"Well, you don't have to be. Come in, anyway," she said. She looked round the hall and grimaced. "Look at this. Would you live with this? Not likely. Getting them in the right mood—half of them didn't know what they were being got in the mood for. Nice boys, some of them, to begin with." She kicked the crimson wall and ushered me into a room on the right.

I wasn't prepared—I couldn't have been. A ground floor room with ward-

robe, dressing table complete with cobwebbed mirror, a bed beneath the window, piles of women's magazines, some thick with dust, and a cat chained to the leg of a chair in the middle of the floor, it wasn't a sense of evil or fear that choked me, it was a sense of something locked away, forgotten and gone bad. The cat padded up to meet me; its chain gave it freedom of the room, but it couldn't quite reach the door.

"Pussy likes you," said Mrs Franklyn, closing the door and sinking into a chair amid a haze of dust; her dress drew up her thighs, but she didn't pull it down. "That could be a good sign, but don't they say only effeminate men can make friends with cats? Why are you looking at me like that?" I hadn't realized I was looking like anything in particular, I was carrying the cat, chain and all, to the chair I took opposite her. "Don't like the chain, is that it? But me and my cat, we're all we've got—I'm not letting her out so they can carry her off and sacrifice her. They would, you know, on their nights. I take her in the garden, that's all; wouldn't trust them further than that." I remembered the flies. "What do you write?" she demanded.

In this context it seemed a little pale to say "Stories of the supernatural."

"Stories, eh? Yes, we all like stories," she mused. "Anything's better than the real thing. Do you want some tea? I'm afraid that's about all I have to offer."

"It's all right, thank you," I refused, I could see cracked cups in the kitchen behind her head. She caught my eye, she was always doing that, damn her.

"Oh, I can't blame you for thinking," she said. "But it gets you down after a while. After he took the house over—you didn't know that, did you?—yes, he did, he married me and then he encroached on every room, keeping things I wouldn't touch all over the house, until I took this room and the kitchen and I told him if you try anything in my rooms *I'll kill you*." She thumped the chair-arm and dust flew out.

"But why did you put up with it?" I had to ask.

"Why? *Because I married him*." The cat fled, knocked over a pile of magazines, sneezed and jumped back, she reeled it in and fondled it. "Now, pussy's not scared of mummy," she soothed and put it down. It began to scratch at her shoe. "Lie down with you, for God's sake," she hissed. It came to me for comfort.

"When I married him," she returned to me, "he promised I'd have all this house to entertain, to do all the things I never could. I believed him. Then I found out how he really was. So I waited. Every day I wished him dead so I'd have my house, what was left of my life. I haven't spoken to him for years, did

you know that?—hardly even seen him. I used to leave his meals outside his room on a tray, if he didn't eat them that was up to him. But when he didn't touch them for three days I went into his room. No, I didn't go in—all those filthy statues and lights and books—but I could see he wasn't there. He was in his stupid little printing press room. He was dead all right. There was a book—he must have been going to copy something—but I didn't read it, the way his face looked was enough I threw it in the bin. Didn't touch him, though—oh, no, they're not going to say I killed him after all the years I've suffered."

"But how did you stand it?" Of course the answer was—she didn't

"Oh, he made me long ago. We met when we were students—I was impressionable then, I thought he was a good man, the best—and later we got married. I ought to have known; there was a rumor he'd been expelled from the University even then, but when he swore he hadn't I trusted him. Then his parents died and left him this house and we got married. My husband—" Her face contorted as if she'd put her hand in something foul. "He took me down to Temphill and made me watch those things dancing on the graves I didn't want to but he said it was for a book he was writing. He held my hand, then. And later we went down the steps below Clotton—oh, you may write, but you'd never dare to write about . . . I don't want to think about it. But it hardened me. It made me tough when he began his mummery back here, trying to stop me destroying all his muck . . ."

That sounded like a cue. "If you haven't thrown away all his books do you think I could look them over? Purely from a writer's viewpoint," I tacked on, why I'm not sure.

"But you're a nice young man, you don't want to become another of his," she said, and sat down on the bed, her dress rose again like a curtain. She began to clear piles of magazines festooned with dust away from the bed, atop one was a vase of dandelions—"Just a touch of color, what's it matter what they are, no-one ever comes," she explained, though the petals had curled and dulled in the flecked light. "Did you ever write from experience? How could you, you've never had what I've had to put up with. The things he's doing even now to hinder me— Only yesterday I picked up one of his books to throw it out and it went sticky and soft things started pushing between my fingers—God!" She wiped her hands down her dress. "I used to lie awake listening to him going to the bathroom and wishing he was dead and last night I heard him flopping round his room, beating on the walls. And this morning I woke early, I thought the sun was coming up—but it was his face

floating over the rooftops . . . It came to the windows, filled them, it followed me from room to room, mouthing at me—God! You'd never write about it, you'd never write about anything again. But he can't get me down, and he knows it. He was always scared of me. That's why he kept me here, to keep me quiet. But he can't have left many of his little tricks behind him. He knows I'll win. But you don't want to get mixed up with the wrong things. You're a nice young man." She swung her legs up and lay back on the pillow, where I could see imprints of hair-dye.

For some time now I'd had the impression that my short story was taking over its own writing; now we seemed to be building to a climax I hadn't foreseen. I had to be direct. "Your husband was buried, wasn't he?" I asked. "Didn't he want to be cremated?"

She seemed to take an age to sit up, her eyes were on me all the while. "How did you know that?" she demanded softly. "You gave yourself away there, didn't you? You *are* one of his! I knew it before you got to the door! Yes, he's buried, where you all should be. Go on, go up and be with him, I'm sure he'd like you to be. He must be able to feel them coming by now—I hope he can. Yes, he was always on about his Eihort, but he doesn't like it when they come for him. You go and look after him, you—"

I didn't know what she might be capable of. I retreated hastily, seeing her watching in the mirror and sneering when she caught my eye. Somehow I dislodged a heap of magazines and buried the cat, which fought its way out and tangled my feet in its chain. "Don't you touch my cat!" she screamed. "She's worth a million of you! What is it, darling, come to mummy—" and I escaped, running down the hall, an inflamed intestine, and through the grass, careless of what I might tread in unseen.

Suddenly I was on solid pavement. Down the street an ice cream van was playing *Greenleeves*. This time the intrusion of mundanity didn't seem so tasteless. I walked home.

By the time I reached the typewriter I'd glimpsed the paradox. Even the supernatural story writer who believes what he writes (and I'm not saying I don't) isn't prepared for an actual confrontation. Quite the reverse, for every time he fabricates the supernatural in a story (unless based on experience) he clinches his skepticism, he knows such things can't be, because he wrote them. Thus for him a confrontation would be doubly upsetting. It would at least force him to re-think all his works. Is this desirable? From the self-

completion angle I suppose it is. At any rate, I'm going. "Go up and be with him" she said—it must be the cemetery on Mercy Hill.

Tomorrow.

EU

(Undated, unaddressed)

I don't know what

(Foregoing deleted, does not appear on carbon; page apparently withdrawn, carbon attached, reinserted into typewriter) Nonsense. Of course I can write about it. The very fact that I can write proves that I'm still functioning.

I took the bus up Mercy Hill at the height of the day. Few things moved; flies and pedestrians crawled, and the workmen climbed sluggishly on the skeletal school. At the intersection with Dee Terrace I saw the house, it seemed swallowed up by grass, forever isolated from its surroundings.

I want to get this over. The caretaker directed me down an avenue, and when I reached - No. Description of graveyard. Why write as if this were my last page? Willows, their branches glowing stippled curves, were spaced carefully toward the Hill out of which the cemetery was carved, in the Hill itself were catacombs, black behind ivy or railings, and above stood the hospital, a grey reminder of hope or despair. What awful irony juxtaposed hospital and graveyard? The avenues were guarded by broken-nosed angels yearning heavenward; one showed a leprous patch where her left eye and cheek had sloughed away. Urns stood here and there like empty glasses at a sick-bed, and a young woman was kneeling with a wreath at a shining memorial; I wonder how long before she shakes him off? And then, toward the catacombs, I saw the new headstone and its bed of pebbles. They gleamed beneath the high sun. I read Franklyn's name and the framing dates, and waited.

It eventually occurred to me that I didn't quite know what I was waiting for; not in that sunlight. Yet the air had hushed. I paced around the grave, and the pebbles shifted. My shadow had moved them. I'm still capable of an anticlimax! My God. I thought. Franklyn is alive down there—or perhaps no longer. Then I saw a possibility. I looked back down the perspective. The young mourner was passing through the gates. I lay down on the grass and put my ear to the pebbles. They ground together, then there was nothing. I felt vilely uncomfortable. Suddenly I realized that I was visible all the way down the avenue to the gates. I went hot all over and scrambled to my feet.

And on the way up I heard something. Something. If only I knew. It'd be better if I had something to confront, anything but this uncertainty which

sucks the confidence from me. It could have been the foreman at that school calling over the noise of riveting. Or it could—yes, must write—it could have been someone imprisoned, paralyzed, summoning a last muscular spasm, screaming thickly for help and beating his fists in the dark as he was dragged downward, downward . . .

I couldn't run, it was too hot. I walked. When I reached the school the girders were rippling in the heat-haze, as if they were alive. I wish I hadn't seen that. No longer could I trust the surface of the world. It was as though it had been instantaneously revealed to me that there were countless forces awake in everything, invisible, things lurking in daylight, shifting, planning—What had they built into the school? What would stalk unseen among the children?

I walked. Of course I was visualizing too much, but I could imagine, I could feel the pavement thin as ice, ready to engulf me in a world where life crawled. I sat in the parks. It was no good; I didn't know what watched from the trees; I didn't know how many of the passers-by might be masked, agents not of this world, preparing the way for—*what?* Who had Franklyn left behind? The peril of the writer: he can't stop thinking. He may survive by writing, but he doesn't really survive. Why am I no—mustn't give in—I wandered until dark, found a cafe, I don't remember. I was in a deserted street of shops with one red window lit above a darkened store. I don't know why, it seemed evil. Franklyn's hall, I suppose.

So I came back and typed this. The street is empty, only the shadow of the streetlamp seems to move. The window opposite is dark. What may be there, waiting?

I can't turn round. I stare at the reflexion of the room behind me. The reflexion—like a framed photograph about to be split open by something climbing forth. When I've written this I shall turn round.

"I don't dare," I have just said aloud.

Where can I go where I don't sense movement behind the scenes?

(Unsigned)

THE INTERLOPER

When Scott entered the classroom it was as if a vacuum jar had been clamped over the class. Thirteen conversations were truncated; thirty boys stood, thirty folding seats slammed back, a geometry set crashed, scattered; John Norris coughed nervously, falsely, wondering if Scott had heard him saying seconds before to Dave Pierce "The Catacombs at lunchtime, then?" Scott's gaze froze about him. "All right, sit down," said Scott. "I don't want this period wasted." He sat. The congregation sat. Homework books were flurried open. John sensed Scott's haste, and pin-cushions grew in his palms, he thought of the solution on which everyone else agreed, he lived for the arrival of the Inspector in the afternoon, when Scott surely couldn't take it out of him.

"Answer to the first one Robbins?" On the bus that morning, during breaks in the dawn game of musical window seats, they'd compared solutions ("What'd you get, Norris?" "34.5" "You sure? I had 17.31" "So did I" "Yes, I did too.") The pins stung. "Correct, $x = 2.03$ or -3.7 . Anybody not get that? Any questions?" But nobody dared stand unless so ordered. "Next Thomas?" Thomas stood, adjusted his homework, gave vent to a spurious sigh of desperate concentration. Scott drummed a stick of chalk, swept down in dusty robes on Thomas. "Come on, lad, you can't dither in an exam. 27.5 is the answer, isn't it?" Thomas beamed. "That's right, s.r., of course." "No it isn't, you blockhead!" Scott strode behind Thomas to peer at his homework, drove his knuckle into Thomas' kidney with an accuracy born of years of practice. "Wake your ideas up, lad! Fuller, can you show Thomas how to think?"

The exam in six months, possessing Scott with terrifying force. The Inspector's visit, driving Scott to fury at being subdued in the afternoon. Oh,

God, John prayed, don't let him ask me question five. "That's it, Fuller Go on, sit down, Thomas, we don't need you as class figurehead. Hawks, what have you got for the next one?" The class next door roared with laughter. Foghorn Ford must be taking them, the English master, John's favorite, who let him write poetry in class sometimes when he'd turned in a particularly good homework. Silence. Laughter John was jealous. Scott was behind him somewhere, pacing closer: "Come on, come *on*, Hawks!" Further down the corridor cracked the flat sound of a strap. Some of the masters you could come to terms with, like the art master; you only had to emulate the skunk to get rid of him. But Strutt, the gym master—he'd have your gym-shoe off for that. And you couldn't do much about Collins' geography class—"Spit" they called him, because sitting on his front row was like standing on a stormy promenade. Yet no class was so suffocated by fear as Scott's. One lunch-hour when John had been writing poetry Thomas had snatched his notebook and Scott had come in and confiscated it; when John had protested Scott had slapped his face. Dave Pierce had told John to protest to Foghorn Ford but he hadn't had the courage. Next door Ford's class laughed. Further off the strap came down. *Whap!* Silence. Laughter. *Whap! Whap! WHAP!* John felt Dave's eyes on him, deploring. He turned to nod and Scott said "Norris!"

He stood. More moist pins stabbed. On the still air hung chalk and Scott's after-shave. "Yes, sir," he stammered.

"Yes, sir. The first time I repeat myself it has to be to you. Question five, Norris, question five!"

The Inspector. The Catacombs at lunchtime. Foghorn Ford always called him "Mr Norris". None of these could comfort him, fear twinged up from his bowels like wind. "34.5, sir?" he pleaded.

"Norris— Thomas I can understand, because he's an idiot, but you— I showed you how to do this one on the board yesterday. Don't tell me you weren't here."

"I was here, sir. I didn't understand, sir."

"You didn't understand, sir. You didn't ask, sir, did you? You were writing poetry about it, were you? Come out here." Scott cast his robes back, chalk whirled into the air.

John wanted to shut his eyes, but that wasn't permitted, the class was watching, willing him to represent them in the ritual without shaming them. Scott pulled John's left hand straight, adjusted it to correct height with the strap. He aimed. John's thumb closed inadvertently. Scott flicked it aside with

the strap. The crowd was hushed, tense. The strap came down. John's hand swelled with hectic blood.

"Now, Pierce," said Scott, "I'm sure you can enlighten your friend."

A bell shrilled. Ford's class pelted to the playground, flattening against the wall to file as Scott approached. "Time for a drink, Ford?" he called. John averted his face as he passed, swollen with fear and hatred. "Scott's not too bad really," Dave Pierce said. "Better than that swine Ford, anyway, keeping me in last week."

Disloyal to his throbbing puffed-up palm, thought John bitterly. "Glad you think so," he muttered.

"Never mind, John. Did you hear this one? Two men go to a doctor, see—"

John could guess the sort of thing: he didn't like to hear it, couldn't join in the secret snigger at "Edgar Allan Poe", "oui-oui" and so on. "We'd better hurry," he interrupted. "You get past the gate and I'll be under the wall."

He strolled past the playground, boys walking, talking, shivering in the pale February light which might have been shed by the gnawed slice of moon on the horizon; a group in one corner huddled round photographs, another conferring over homeworks for the afternoon, beyond, on the misty playing-field, a few of Strutt's favorites running in gym-suits. On the bus that morning a man cradling a briefcase had offered to help John with his homework, but he was obscurely scared of strange men. He stood against the wall beyond the playground. When Dave's lunch pass flew over, he caught it and made for the gate.

A prefect leaned against the railings, he straightened himself, frowning, as befitted his position—one day a week for the school spirit, he'd rather be at the pub. Above his head words were scratched on the King George V Grammar sign through the caretaker's third coat of paint, in defiance of the headmaster's regular threats. John flashed the pass from his good hand and escaped.

Down the road Dave was waiting by fragments of a new school—a lone shining coffee-urn on a counter, pyramids of chairs, skulls drawn in whitewash on the one plate-glass pane; a plane had left a fading slash of whitewash on the sky. "How do we get to The Catacombs?" Dave asked.

"I don't know," John answered, feeling comfort drain, emptying the hour. "I thought you did."

Heels clicked by in unison. "Let's follow these girls, then. They're a bit of all right," Dave said. "They may be going."

John drew into himself; if they turned they'd laugh at his school blazer. Their pink coats swung, luring Dave, their perfume trailed behind them—The Catacombs would be thick with that and smoke. He followed Dave. The girls leapt across the road, running as if to jettison their legs, and were lost in a pillared pub between a shuttered betting-shop and the Co-operative Social Club. Dave was set to follow, but John heard drumming somewhere beneath the side street to their left. "It's up here," he said "Come on, we've lost ten minutes already."

Cars on the main road swept past almost silently, in the side street they could hear beneath their feet a pounding drum, a blurred electric guitar. Somewhere down there were The Catacombs—but the walls betrayed no entrance to this converted cellar, reclaimed by the city in its blind subterranean search for space. Menace throbbed into the drum from the rhythm of John's hot hand. Spiders shifted somnolently in a white web wall within a crevice. A figure approached down the alley, a newspaper seller with an armful of *Brichester Herald*s, his coat furred and patched as the walls. John drew back. The man passed in silence, one hand on the bricks. As he leaned on the wall opposite the boys it gave slightly, a door disguised as uneven stone swung inward from its socket. The man levered himself onward.

"That must be it," Dave said, stepping forward.

"I'm not so sure." The man had reached the main road and was creaking "Brichester Herald!" John glanced back and saw the pub door open. Scott appeared and strode toward him.

"No," John said. He thrust Dave through the opening, his last glimpse was of Scott buying a *Brichester Herald*. "That was your friend Scott," he snarled at Dave.

"Well, it's not my fault." Dave pointed ahead, down a stone corridor leading to a faint blue light around a turn. "That must be The Catacombs."

"Are you sure?" John asked, walking. "The music's getting fainter. In fact, I can't hear it any more."

"I couldn't really hear it any more when we came in," Dave admitted. "Come on, it's got to be here." They rounded the turn.

A wan blue glow narrowed away into dimness. Slowly a perspective formed, a long stone passage, faintly glistening, too narrow to admit them abreast, perhaps turning in the distance—somehow lit by its own stones, luminously blue. It lured curiosity, yet John grasped Dave's arm. "This can't be it," he said. "We'd better not go on."

"I am, anyway. I want to see where it leads."

"Wait a minute," John said. "I just want to go back and see—" But he couldn't pronounce his inner turmoil. He was already frightened; they might get lost and not be back for Scott's class this afternoon. If Dave wanted to go on, let him. He was going back.

He turned the corner of the stagnant blue light and plunged into darkness. The moistness of the air hinted of lightless underground pools; the only sound was the sliding of his heels on slimy stone. He reached the wall ahead, the door. There was no door.

One fingernail, exploring, broke. He bit it off. His left hand, still sore, flinched from the wet unbroken stone. Suddenly alone and threatened, John fled back into the blue twilight, slipping in his own tracks. Dave was not waiting.

"Oh, God," John moaned. His eyes adjusted. Far down the perspective he made out a vague shape vanishing, its shadows suppressed by the unwavering light. He hurled himself into the corridor, arms scraping the stone, the archway hurling by above him, a turquoise spider plummeting on an azure thread, winding itself back. Globules beaded the brick; still plunging headlong, John brushed his forehead with his hand. Ahead the figure halted, waiting. "The door's shut. We can't get out," John panted, sobbing for breath.

"Then you'll have to come with me," Dave said. "There must be another way out of this place, whatever it is."

"But we're going downward," John discovered.

"I know that. So we'll have to go up again somewhere. Maybe. Look!"

They were still walking, they had turned another bend. The passage twisted onward, glowing. John tried not to look at Dave, the light had drained his face of blood, and doubt glinted faintly in his eyes. On the stone floor wisps of cobweb, tinted blue, led to another turn. And in the left-hand wall Dave had seen an opening, foreshortened. He ran to it; John followed, robbed of The Catacombs, seeking a way back to Scott's next class, to the Inspector. Dave faced the opening, and the doubt in his eyes brightened.

It was an opening, but a dead end—an archway six feet high, a foot deep, empty except for filaments of cobweb which their breath sucked out to float and fall back. Dave peered in, and a spider as large as a thumb ran from a matted corner. He threw himself aside, but the spider was empty, rattling on the stone.

John had pressed past to the next bend. Another downward twist; another alcove. He waited for Dave to join him. The second alcove was thick with cobwebs; they filled it, shining dully, shifting as Dave again took the lead.

The boys were running, the light congealed about them, the ceiling descended, threads of cobweb drifted down. A turn, an alcove, webs. Another. Glancing sideways, John was chilled by a formless horror, the cobwebs in the alcove suggested a shape which he should be able to distinguish. But another fear burned this away like acid: returning late for Scott's class. "Look, it's widening!" Dave shouted. Before John could see beyond him, they had toppled out into an open space.

It was a circular vaulted chamber; above their heads a dome shone blue through webs like clouds. In the walls gaped other archways, radiating from the circular pool in the center of the chamber. The pool was still. Its surface was a beaded mat of cobwebs like a rotting jewelled veil. "I don't get it," Dave whispered; his voice settled through the air, disturbing shining airborne wisps. John said nothing. Then Dave touched his arm and pointed.

Beyond the pool, between two archways, stood a rack of clothes: hats, caps, a black overcoat, a tweed suit, a pinstripe with an incongruous orange handkerchief like a flag, a grey. They filled John with nightmare horror. "It must be a tramp," he said desperately.

"With all these things? I'm going to have a closer look." Dave moved round the pool.

"No, Dave, wait!" John skidded round the pool in pursuit, one foot slipped on the pool's rim. He looked down, and his reflexion was caught by cobwebs, jewelled with droplets, swallowed up. His voice vanished into corridors. "It's past one now! You try one passage and I'll try another. One of them must lead out." Immediately he realized that he would be alone in his corridor among the matted alcoves; but at least he'd diverted Dave from the suits.

"That's the best idea, yes. Just wait till I have a look at these. It won't take a minute."

"You do that if you want to!" cried John. "I'm getting back!" He fell into the passage next to that through which they had entered, the first alcove was less than a minute ahead. He looked back miserably. Dave was peering at the suits. John forced himself over the harsh blue stone. Then Dave screamed.

John knew he had to run—but to Dave or away? He was too old for blind heroism, too young for conscious selflessness. His legs trembled, he felt sick. He turned.

Dave hadn't moved, but one suit lay crumpled at his feet. He was staring at what it had hung upon, too far for John to see in the blue haze. John's hand pulsed and perspired. He stretched out his fingers toward Dave as if to draw him forward, Dave's hands were warding off whatever was before him. John

tore his feet free of the urge to flee. As he began to trudge forward, a figure moved between him and Dave. Cobwebs held to its shape like an aura. John recognized the profile and the patched coat. It was the newspaper-seller.

John struggled to shriek a warning to Dave—but of what? His lips were gummed shut as if by cobwebs. His legs were tied to the stone. The man moved round the pool, beyond John's vision. John's lips worked, and Dave turned. His mouth opened, but this time no scream came. He backed around the pool, past the suits. And something appeared, hopping toward him inside the patched overcoat: long arms with claws reaching far beyond the sleeves, a head protruding far above the collar, and from what must have been a mouth a pouring stream of white which drifted into the air and sank toward Dave's face as he fell, finally screaming. John clapped his hands over his ears as he ran toward the outside world, but Dave's screams had already been muffled.

As he fled past the first alcove, the web moaned feebly and opened a glazed eye. No more, he prayed, no more. Each turning was the last; each stretch was cruelly telescoped by the unrelenting light. His lungs were burning; each sucked breath drew a wisp of cobweb into his throat. In one alcove a girl's eyes pleaded; her hand stretched a wedding ring toward him. He screamed to blot out her stifled cries. In answer came a sound of something hopping round a bend behind him, of something wet slapping the walls. A web-wisp brushed his cheek. He blundered onward. Another bend. He heaved around it hoarsely, and saw daylight.

The door was propped with an empty milk bottle, someone had found and blocked it, perhaps meaning to return. He staggered out onto a patch of waste ground: a broken bed, a disembowelled car, a baby's rattle encrusted with mud. Reaching behind him, he wrenched out the bottle. The door became one with the earth. Then he fell face downward on the bed.

Dave! He was down there in an alcove! John jerked to his feet, shivering. Through the slight drizzle he saw people passing, eyeing him oddly. He couldn't tell them, they might be from the pool. Someone had to know. Dave was in The Catacombs—no, in the catacombs. Someone. Where was he? He sidled to the pavement, watching them all, ready to scream if one came near. Up the road from the school, in the opposite direction to that they'd taken so long ago. Even further from home than he'd thought. Ford. He'd tell Ford that Dave was in The Catacombs. He made for the school, the tangled lines of rain on the pavement looked like something he'd forgotten.

Scott was waiting at the gate. He folded his arms as John appeared. John's terror kicked him in the stomach. Scott's lips opened, waiting, then his gaze

slipped from John to someone behind him, and his expression altered. "All right, Norris, you'd better get to class," he said.

It was the Inspector! John thought as he hurried up the stairs to the familiar faces. He didn't know where Ford was—perhaps he could tell the Inspector that Dave was in The Catacombs. If Scott would let him. He'd have to—he was scared of the Inspector. "He's scared of the Inspector," he said to Dave. "What?" said Hawks behind him.

Scott and the Inspector entered, Scott held the door politely. The class stood, raising chalk-dust and a cobweb from John's blazer, which was grey with wisps, he saw. But then so was the Inspector's pinstripe suit even the orange handkerchief in his top pocket. "Dave, sir—Mr Ford—" cried John, and vomited into his open desk. "My God!" shouted Scott. "Please, Mr Scott," said the Inspector in a voice light yet clinging as cobwebs, "the boy's ill. He looks frightened. I'll take him downstairs and arrange something for him."

"Shall I wait?" hissed Scott.

"Better start your class, Mr Scott. I'll have time to find out all I want to know about them."

Bare corridors. Leaping tiles smelling of polish. A strap cracking. Somewhere, laughter. A headlong latecomer who gaped at John and the figure leading him by the wrist. The tuning of the school orchestra. The dining-room, bare tables, metal plates. The cloakroom, racks of coats stirring in a draught. "I don't think we can entrust you to any else's care," said the Inspector.

The gates, deserted. They turned toward the pillared pub, the side street. There was still time. The fingers on his wrist were no longer fingers. The eyes were veiled as the pool. Two women with wheel baskets were approaching. But his mouth was already choked closed by fear. They passed on toward the side street. Yet his ears were clear, and he heard the comment one woman made.

"Did you see that? I'll wager another case of 'unwillingly to school'!"

Relationships

THE SENTINELS

They were the last people Douglas expected to see in the village pub, but their appearance could hardly have been better timed.

"Good Lord," he called, "Ken! Maureen! Come and help persuade Barb to drive up to Sentinel Hill."

"Doug," Barbara said uneasily, looking to the newcomers for help but finding none: they'd hurried to the table through the sawdust, eager as children kicking sand. She searched the pub farmers' faces propped on elbows like florid gargoyles, puffing clouds of pipe smoke which buoyed up a last moth circling the oil lamp on invisible elastic ten miles from home and not a face to which she could look for aid.

"Barb, don't be anti social," Doug reproved. "This is Ken and Maureen—I met them at the science-fiction convention. You two want to go up on the hill, don't you?"

"If the young lady's driving I don't see why not," Ken said, "but first I must buy you a drink."

He took their orders and Maureen sat opposite Barbara, setting a transistor radio between them. "Why don't you want to go?" she asked Barbara. "You won't be scared with Doug, surely. The hill's got a terrific atmosphere, more so than this pub."

Barbara thought of Sentinel Hill. They'd driven past at dusk on their way to the pub: the sloughed stone faces mobile with shadow, a few cars, uniformly grey, from which their passengers had climbed to count the stones and count again and descend baffled, a child at the center of the circle prancing awkwardly and, as she'd slowed to let Doug watch, turning to her a cardboard

demon's face. "I can't see any sense in going," she told Maureen. "It's warm in here, but it'll be icy cold up there this time of year."

"I'm sure Doug will keep you warm," Maureen said.

Barbara watched Ken returning from the bar, his arm beneath the tray supple as a waiter's. "Ken moves beautifully," she said to Douglas.

"You can judge better than I." That morning he'd awoken to rhythmic thuds in the next room; he'd strode across her bedroom, past the framed embroidery, the flowers in a cut glass vase fragile as the chime of the bell her mother used to denote dinner, and found her leaping, graceful as a fountain, before a propped ballet manual. She hadn't noticed him; he'd tiptoed back to his side of the bed and *The Eighth Pan Book of Horror Stories*. "Barb says you move beautifully," he told Ken.

"I shall find a way to repay the compliment."

"How did you two meet?" asked Maureen.

"Quite by accident," Douglas said. "Someone invited me to what I thought was an all night party, only it turned out to be a musical evening. Six weeks ago, that was. I suppose the Brichester SF Group was up in arms about that diatribe in the *Herald*, Ken?"

"These days we ignore the critics. Let's face it, only fans appreciate sf. Mundanes never will. At least, it'll never be appreciated as literature while the critics insist on setting it apart from the mainstream."

"I'm a fantasy man myself."

"I wish he'd read something else," Barbara said, looking away as the moth toppled inside the oil lamp: a flare, a wisp of smoke. "Not that science fiction's any better."

"Don't start that again," Douglas warned.

"Fantasy's indistinguishable from sf? At the Convention you'd be shot at dawn!" Ken said. "I don't mind fantasy, but I do wish people wouldn't call it sf. Still, it explains why you're drawn to the hell, Doug."

"Not drawn," Douglas said, glancing sharply at Barbara, "just interested."

"It's like Rollright," Maureen interrupted. "Do you remember that girl at the Convention talking about the Druid circle at Rollright?" Douglas thought he did: they had found her asleep on a bed in Dave Kyle's room, her hand full of change for one of the card playing writers. It had been Douglas' first Convention; the first night he'd staggered sickly from the Liverpool Group's party, and the next day he'd had to saddle out from lectures as the stage began to slip below his vision. On the Saturday he'd met Ken and Maureen in the Brichester Group's room, and then had gone early to bed, hearing someone

putting his fist through a pane, the thud of a bottle, what sounded like a mob breaking down a bedroom door. It must have been the strangeness of it all. Even in the horror fans he'd never recognized his visions, the thrill of slipping into its niche the last of a set of magazines, the membranous wings against the moon, the face which peered back from the pool, the pale stone steps descending into darkness. He'd thought when he'd met Barbara that he could reflect his images in her. He was still trying.

"If you're a science-fiction reader," Barbara was saying to Ken, "you won't be interested in Sentinel Hill."

"Fan, dear, not reader." He was lifting the last of his beer to Maureen's lips. "I don't want to seem hidebound," he said.

Maureen caught his hand and wiped her mouth. "Come on, you two, drink up," she called. "I want to play my radio."

Ken pulled her to her feet and led her toward the door. Their shadows drew across the farmers and refreshed them: gargoyles, yes, but protective as a church. "Don't let's go tonight," Barbara whispered. "Let's go home instead."

"We will, of course, afterwards. Your parents are away all weekend, after all." Douglas stood, above his head a flake of ash fluttered in the oil lamp. "We don't want to seem unfriendly," he said.

Beyond the houses in the square outside the pub stretched a field, iced by the moon, sharp as the surface of December air which instantly moulded to her. If they invited Ken and Maureen to her home for Christmas Eve next week perhaps the others wouldn't mind their driving back to Exham now - but no doubt Ken and Maureen would be otherwise occupied. She'd tried her best, she didn't want to make a scene. "Would you really rather not go to the hill?" Douglas asked.

"I don't want to spoil the evening for everyone. I'm the only one who can drive."

In the back seat Maureen switched on the radio. Singing, the car swung about and rushed headlong from the village, its lights touching small high empty windows, projecting a tilted ploughshare on a barn. Ahead Barbara saw avenues of bleached trees sweep to meet them, immediately engulfed by shadow, threshing as they passed. On the road stones gleamed like toads, one hopped. She wasn't sure how far ahead the hill would rise. "I don't like the name," she said.

"What name?" Douglas enquired abstractedly, moving his arm along the back of the seat.

"Oh, Doug. Sentinel Hill."

"I shouldn't think you would," Maureen said. "They're supposed to guard the hill against anyone who doesn't make a sacrifice to them."

"I don't know what you mean," Barbara declared, the bloodless trees waved wildly, a sinister greeting. "I suppose I've been brought up apart from such things. Who guard? A sacrifice to whom?"

"The Sentinels. You remember, Doug, that girl was saying they make pilgrimages to Rollright from Birmingham on Walpurgisnacht. I gather something like that happens here. Have you been to a Convention, Barbara?"

"She hasn't yet but I hope she will next year," Douglas said.

"I thought next Easter you might come up to Exham," said Barbara, "to stay with us."

The highest twigs pulled free of the moon like strands of cobweb, and the hill swelled up before her. Above the depression into which her car slowed as if summoned, the ring of shapes stood white and waiting. She could no longer play for time. She turned the car so that it was poised for the road, the headlamps spotlighted a gate into a field opposite, one bar comfortably askew, pale uncombed grass beyond, barbed wire atop the gate silver as tips of lightning. "I'll leave the engine running," she said. "We won't be long."

"Think of the petrol," Douglas expostulated.

"I don't want the engine to catch cold."

"I shall bring my radio as protection," decided Maureen, and dragged Ken toward the figures. Over the tinny jangle and the announcer's voice Barbara heard Ken. "I hope we're not going to stay all night, this seems a bit futile to me." The radio faded, soon it would be inside the circle. Barbara felt obscurely disturbed; it seemed like an insult, a blasphemy. Nonsense. The Sentinels were relics, no more.

Douglas took her hand and began to climb. He caught her glancing back, but all he could see was the car, thumping like his heart, and a gate. He felt deliciously unnerved. The moon stood above the circle like the beginnings of a face, ominously still against the tethered trees, the Sentinels surveyed the countryside. On one side of the circle, silhouettes of branches rippled like unquiet muscles; opposite, a figure held its stumps before it like a dog beneath the moon, begging or about to pounce. He hoped Barbara felt frightened too. He wanted her to grip his hand until it hurt.

They met the others in the center of the ring. Their coats were shaken by the wind, the girls' headscarves blew out like flats. "It's senseless to call them the Sentinels," Barbara said, "when some of them are facing inward."

Maureen surveyed the circle, the rough ambiguous hump each back pre-

sented "I don't know where you get that," she called above the radio "They're all facing outward."

"But as we came up I thought— Oh, well. Doug must be affecting me "

"There is a story, though, that you can't count them," Maureen continued, craning on tiptoe, clutching Ken's shoulder for support "Eighteen, I make it."

"Seventeen, surely," Ken argued. "You must have counted twice "

"I have eighteen too," Douglas said. "Barb?"

"Oh, I don't know. You're all pretty close, I'm sure Yes, yes, eighteen No, nineteen."

"We must split up and go round," Maureen said "Me and Ken, you and Barbara Here's where we start " She ran and crowned one figure with the radio. At once a voice sang from its erased mouth.

They followed her, bruising the moon-painted turf "We'll go anti-clockwise," Douglas said. "One. Two " The radio's song streamed away on the wind The Sentinels waited to be discovered From the road they hadn't looked like this to Barbara: each face set back in a cracked cowl, fragments of the cheeks emerging from shadow like petrified sponge, beneath the cowl, the folds and ridges of what once might have been a cloak, from which protruded hands or wrists held high like the parodied paws of an animal The heads came up to Barbara's shoulder "What were they supposed to be?" she asked, instantly regretting.

"Six Seven I don't know Not human, anyway Look at those pores As though they'd sack your soul out Or something might crawl from one of them " He thought he remembered a story like that "Now, Barb, I didn't mean it. I was only joking." He embraced her.

She closed her eyes Not here, she thought, but she opened her mouth Behind her eyelids floated fear, the moon was steady, waiting patiently, old as the Sentinels They swayed Something supported her Two hands clutched her waist She struggled and looked down They were stone stumps She choked, for a timeless second she was wedged, caught She slipped on the turf and was free.

"I'm sorry I brought you," Douglas said Ken and Maureen passed them, counting "Now then, we're winning!" Maureen laughed

The next face was blank as the moon, except for the eyes They must have been deep indeed, in one a hollow spider rattled in a cobweb, like a loose eye "Do we count this?" Douglas wondered, pointing

Inside the circle, behind the figure, a bud of stone grew from the earth. She

couldn't see what it was meant to be. Douglas drew her to stand by the Sentinel while he tried to connect the protrusion with the figure. Unwillingly she glanced at what stood by her shoulder. From this angle she thought she saw the hint of a mouth; it was grinning. The head was about to turn; the eye would come first, the cobwebbed eye rolling in glee. "Come on, Doug," she said unevenly. "The others want to go."

"Seventeen, eighteen," Douglas finished, touching the stone on which the radio was balanced. Beneath the moon the radio's light had dimmed.

"Same as me," Maureen told Ken triumphantly. "What did you have, Barbara?"

But Barbara was listening for some sound which should have underlaid the radio's. She stared down the hill toward the road. The gate was gone. "The car!" she cried, and ran.

She climbed out of the driving seat as they pelted down. "It's dead," she said. she seemed on the edge of weeping. She gripped Douglas' hand; he thrust his fingers through hers, happy.

"I trust you're suitably frightened," Ken said to Maureen.

"One hysterical female will do, I should think."

"I'm not given to melodramatics." Barbara gripped Douglas' fingers between her own. "There's nothing more frustrating than a dead car, that's all. Can you fix engines, Ken?"

"Haven't the faintest, I'm sorry to say. We don't feel the need for a car. We only met you tonight because we took the first bus we saw."

"I hope it won't be too cold in the car." Barbara pulled at Douglas' hand.

"You're joking! We must spend the night on the hill."

"Well, my God," Ken muttered.

"Poor Ken," said Maureen. "I know we could be safe in bed. Never mind, we must take advantage of the atmosphere, at least for a while."

As they climbed Barbara looked for a ring on Maureen's finger, there was none. She realized Maureen didn't care about appearances, even flaunted them, it seemed cheap, somehow. She'd changed her own ring over for the weekend. If she saw a car approaching she'd run to it for help. With the engine, she meant. It couldn't be long before they'd be back in Exham. Her thoughts returned there, she'd thought her embroidery was sewn upon her mind, but the threads had pulled free; she couldn't blot out the approaching silent figures, nor Maureen's voice. "What's happened to my radio?"

Although they were close now, the music was no louder. They reached the crest of the hill, and the music vanished with the light from within. For a

moment the radio stood mute, an absurd crown. Then something moved; it must have been the wind. The radio toppled to the turf.

"Well, that is annoying. It really is. I'm sure I haven't used up all that battery," Maureen said.

The car and radio were dead; the gate was swallowed. The moon poured vitality into the Sentinels; they seemed closer now, threateningly still against the surrounding restless woods. Barbara urged Douglas away from the figures. "I'm cold," she told him. "Please, Doug, Let's stay in the car."

But Douglas was otherwise alert, to something like the souging of the trees, yet not. Voices whispering. A chorused hiss consonants which spat hostility, forming words which he could almost understand. He whirled. It was the radio. Before the others could turn, he had smashed the radio with his heel.

"Doug!" Barbara cried. He saw her hand flash. His cheek blazed, hot as crimson. His fist clenched, then slackened. While she'd thought she was preserving sanity she had lashed out at her own fears. She met his eyes. "I'm sorry," she said. She clutched his hand, he didn't respond.

"It's all right." But it wasn't—once his mother had slapped his face when he'd shrieked at an autumn leaf which had leapt on his coverlet like a spider. In those days she'd made him sell his magazines as soon as he'd filled a shelf—just as Barbara might, he thought. He didn't want a mother or a nurse.

"It's damn well not all right," Ken said. "Eleven quid that cost. There wasn't eleven quid's worth of bloody static in that radio."

"I'll pay, don't worry."

"Never mind, Ken, it was a lovely present," Maureen interrupted. "We can always get another. Don't let's quarrel." She crossed to Douglas. "Where was that stone you didn't know whether to count?"

"Over here." Barbara stood near the edge of the circle, biting her lip, staring at the turf. Ken followed them.

"Oh, yes. There's another one opposite, I think." Maureen turned back to Ken. "Talk to Barb," she called. "Doug and I are telling ghost stories."

"Well, if that's the way it goes, I'll look after Barb," Ken said, kicking the radio, which had drawn electricity from the moon.

"I don't need looking after!" But Barbara didn't move away. Behind her a shape held up its hands.

"I didn't really want to show you anything," Maureen whispered. The head at her elbow seemed intent. "I didn't want your friend to overhear. I know why you smashed the radio. I felt it too."

"We'll be all right," Douglas whispered back. "There's four of us. Listen, if you feel this way, maybe we really should stay in the car."

"You were waiting for me?" A smile fluttered across Maureen's mouth. She moved to place him against the wind, which had begun to flap more strongly about them. "Don't you realize I'm terrified to death? I couldn't show it either. Doug—I keep seeing something running round the edge of the circle."

"What?" He'd raised his voice; he stared at each figure

"Not now," she hissed. "It's never there when I look at it directly."

"Listen," he said intensely, "I've read about this sort of thing. It might be safer to stay within the circle."

"Oh, God, I don't know. I don't know." Her eyes roamed. "Look!" she cried.

Something pale had moved; he had thought it was a tree. The branches had now almost grasped the sinking moon. He peered about the circle. It was still, only the trees between swayed as if possessed. "There is something," he whispered, wanting not to tell Maureen, to protect her. "I'm sure one of the figures has gone. It's the one I had trouble with counting."

Before he could stop her, she was shouting against the hectic wind: "You two, quick! Is the circle complete?" She twisted on her axis. The countryside tossed as if in the throes of a nightmare. Ken was yelling: "*One*, damn it, *two*, damn it—" Then Barbara shrieked: "No!"

Maureen hid her face on Douglas' chest. "I know what she's seen," she mumbled. "I don't know which it was. One of the figures isn't stone." She was trembling. Douglas put his arm about her shoulders

Ken saw them, his face darkened. He pulled Barbara to him. She thrust him away and backed to the edge of the circle, her fists high. Behind her she was mimicked. Then she saw Maureen and Douglas. She cried out wordlessly and turned. Before they realized, she was stumbling down the hill toward the car.

"She's made it," Douglas said in Maureen's ear, stroking her hair, trying to caress courage into her. "If we can follow—" But she was still shaking. He knew what was wrong, they had to pass between the Sentinels, and he didn't dare to search for what she had seen. The trees were leaping for the moon; the wind was thrusting him toward the Sentinels. He glanced about wildly for Ken. Ken was stooping by the radio, standing up with what he'd found—a razor-sharp fragment of metal.

Then the car started.

Maureen's head turned. Together they ran to the edge of the circle. "We

must make it," he told her. "Close your eyes and cling to me." But she hadn't closed them when she screamed.

In the road below, the car had conjured forth the gate like an image of escape. They could see Barbara, tiny in the window from which light streamed forth like mist, intent on the dashboard, too intent to notice through the other window the figure squatting like a watchdog.

"The face," Maureen sobbed, clutching Douglas.

Douglas hurled her away, to Ken, who'd dropped the shard of metal. "What face?" Ken muttered. "I can't see."

"Oh God," Douglas shouted. "Barbara!" The car whipped about, losing the gate, and skidded into the road. A tunnel of trees sprang forth, into which it plunged. The figure ran alongside, skipping high.

Douglas slithered down the grass, ran panting up the road, falling on stones, running onward. Ahead the tunnel of light dwindled, Barbara had gone. Only the last light of the car and, as it turned a corner, the shape which leapt easily onto the roof.

The others found Douglas kneeling in the road. When they spoke he met their eyes, and they were silent. Together they stared ahead into the night, waiting for the sound.

THE GUY

You can't hide from Guy Fawkes' Night. This year as usual I played Beethoven's Fifth to blot out sound and memory, turned it loud and tried to read, fought back faces from the past as they appeared. In September and October the echoes of lone fireworks, the protests of distant startled dogs, the flopping faceless figures propped at bus-stops or wheeled in prams by children, had jarred into focus scenes I'd thought I had erased. Finally, as always, I stood up and succumbed. Walking, I saw memories, fading like the exploding molten claws upon the sky. On waste ground at the edge of Lower Brixhester a gutted bonfire smouldered. Children stood about it, shaking sparklers as a dog shakes a rat. Then wood spat fire and flared, a man dragged off his boy to bed. Defined by flame, the child's face fell in upon itself like a pumpkin wizening from last week's Hallowe'en. He sobbed and gasped, but no words came. And I remembered.

A papier-maché hand, a burning fuse, a scream that never came. But the memory was framed by the day's events, the houses of the past, my own and Joe Turner's, were overlaid by the picture I'd built up from behind my desk that morning, the imagined home of the boy who'd stood before me accused of setting fireworks in a car's exhaust pipe—drunken father, weak wife, back-garden lavatory, all the trimmings—I could see it clearly without having seen it. My parents hadn't liked my change of ambition from banker to probation officer, faced with the choice, I'd left them. "Don't you know they all carry razors these days?" my father had protested round his pipe. "Get yourself a little security. Then you can help them if you must. Look at your mother—don't you think the clothes she gives away mean anything?" Referred to, my mother had joined in. "If you deal with such people all day, Denis, you'll

become like them." The same prejudices at which I'd squirmed when I was at school: when the Turners moved into our road.

Joe Turner was in the class next door to me, he'd started there that term when the Turners had come up from Lower Brixhester. Sometimes, walking past their house, I'd heard arguments, the crash of china, a man's voice shouting: "Just because we've moved in with the toffs, don't go turning my house into Buckingham Palace!" That was Mr Turner. One night I'd seen him staggering home, leaning on our gate and swearing, my father had been ready to go out to him, but my mother had restrained him. "Stay in, don't lower yourself." She was disgusted because Mr Turner was drunk, I'd realized that but couldn't see how this was different from the parties at our house, the Martini bottles, the man who'd fallen into my bedroom one night and apologized, then been loudly sick on the landing. I was sorry for Mr Turner because my parents had instantly disliked him. "I don't object to them as people. I don't know them, not that I want to," my father had said. "It's simply that they'll bring down the property values for the entire street if they're not watched." "Have you seen their back garden?" my mother responded. "Already they've damped an old dresser out there." "Perhaps they're getting ready for a bonfire," I suggested. "Well, remember you've to stay away," my mother warned. "You're not to mix with such people." I was fourteen, ready to resent such prohibitions. And of course I was to have no bonfire, it might dull the house's paint or raze the garden. Instead, a Beethoven symphony for the collection I didn't then appreciate. "Why not?" I complained. "I go to school with him." "You may," my father agreed, "but just because the school sees fit to lower its standards doesn't mean we have to fall in with the crowd." "I don't see what's wrong with Joe," I said. A look spoke between my parents. "Someday," said my mother, "when you're older—"

There was always something about Joe they wouldn't specify. I thought I knew what they found objectionable, the acts schoolboys admire are usually deplored by their parents. Joe Turner's exploits had taken on the stature of legend for us. For example, the day he'd sworn at a teacher who'd caned him, paying interest on his words. "Some night I'll get him," Joe told me walking home, spitting further than I ever could. Or the magazines he showed us, stolen from his father as he said. He told terrifying stories of his father's buckled belt. *I Kept the US Army Going*, by a Fraulein, my vocabulary grew enormously in two months, until the only time my father ever hit me. I felt enriched by Joe, soon it was him and me against the teachers, running from

the lavatories, hiding sticks of chalk. Joe knew things; the tales of Lower Brixhester he told me as we walked home were real, not like the jokes the others told, sniggering in corners. Joe didn't have to creep into a corner to talk. In the two months since he'd run after me and parodied my suburban accent until we'd fought and become inseparable, he showed me sides of life I never knew existed. All of which helped me to understand the people who appear before my desk. Even the seat behind my desk belongs to Joe as much as to me; it was Joe who showed me injustice.

It was late October, two weeks before the bonfire, that fragments of the picture began to fit together. From my window, writing homework, I'd watched early rockets spit a last star and fall far off, once I'd found a cardboard cylinder trodden into the pavement. That was magic: not the Beethoven. So that when Joe said: "I bet you won't be coming to my bonfire," I flared up readily. "Why shouldn't I?" I attacked him, throwing a stone into someone's garden.

"Because your parents don't like us." He threw a stone and cracked mine open.

"We're us," I said loyally. "I'll be coming. What's the matter, don't you like it up here in Brixhester?"

"It's all right. My father didn't want to move. I couldn't care less, really. It was my mother. She was scared."

I imagined I knew what he meant: stones through the front windows, boys backing girls into alleys, knives and bottles outside the pubs, I'd probably have been as scared. But he continued: "She didn't want to live where my brother was."

We ran from a stretched rain and stood beneath an inscribed bus shelter, two housewives disapproved of us and brought umbrellas down like shields. "Where's your brother now? In the Army?" In those days that was my idea of heroism.

"He was younger than me. He's dead." The umbrellas lifted a little, then determinedly came down.

"Hell." I wasn't equipped to deal with such things. "What happened?" I asked, curiosity intermixed with sympathy.

"Of course only ill brought up boys try to impress with made up stories," came from beneath the umbrellas.

Joe made a sign at them in which I hurriedly joined. We went out into the thinning lines of drizzle. I didn't like to ask again, I waited for Joe to take me into his trust. But he was silent until he reached our road, suburban villas

pronged with tv aerials, curtains drawn back to display front room riches. "You won't really come to my bonfire," he repeated suddenly. his eyes gleamed like the murderer's in the film we'd surreptitiously seen last Saturday, luring the girl toward his camera with its built-in spike.

"See if I don't."

"Well, I'd better say goodbye now. You won't want to be seen near your house with me."

"You watch this!" I shouted angrily, and strode with him arm in arm to his door. Joe beat on the knocker, which hung by a screw. "You're not coming in, are you?" he asked.

"If you've no objection." The door opened and Joe's mother appeared, patched jumper, encircled eyes and curlers. she saw me and frowned. "I'm Joe's friend," I tried to ingratiate myself.

"I didn't know he had any up this end." But she closed the door behind us. "Your father's not feeling well," she told Joe.

"Who's that?" a man's voice roared beyond the hall, the ancient coat-stand where an overcoat hung by a ragged tag, the banister wrenched dangerously by some unsteady passage. "Is that Joe just come in? Have you been spilling paraffin round the house, you little bastard?"

Joe's mother glanced at him and winced, then hurried with Joe toward the voice. Left alone, I followed. Vests hung in the kitchen, Mr Turner sat in vest and braces at the table with his feet up, spitting into the sink, a Guinness at his side. "Of course he hasn't, Fred," she intervened unevenly.

"Then it's you," her husband shouted at her. "You've got that trunk hidden somewhere. I'll find it and fix it for good, my girl, don't you worry. I heard them moving round in there last night."

"Oh my God," Mrs Turner muttered. "Shut up, will you, shut up, shut up..."

Her husband snarled at her, tried to stand up, raised a foot and thumped it on the table. "You watch out, my girl," he threatened. Then he noticed me in the doorway. "Who the bloody hell's that?" he yelled.

"A friend of Joe's. I'll make some tea," she told me, trying to ignore her husband's mumbling.

"I'll do it," Joe said. he seemed anxious to please.

"No, it's all right. You go and talk to your friend."

"I'll help you carry it in."

"Don't bother. I can manage." She looked at Joe strangely, I couldn't tell why: I know now she was scared.

"How much bloody tea do you think we've got in this house?" Mr Turner bawled. "Every little bastard Joe brings home gets a free meal, is that what you think?" I'd become the victim and I didn't like it; I looked at Joe and his mother in turn, attempting to convey my regret for having been a witness, for my incomprehension, for fleeing, for everything. Then I escaped from the misshapen house.

In the next week our walks home were jagged with silence, the unspoken. I said no more about Joe's brother, nor did he. The bonfire approached, and I waited to be invited again; I felt that my experience in Joe's house had rendered our friendship unstable. Meanwhile, each night as I worked in my bedroom, hissing trails of sparks explored the sky, distant shots resounded like warfare. One night, a week before Guy Fawkes', I abandoned my history homework in the middle of a sentence, stared round my room, at my father's inherited *Children's Encyclopaedia* beneath my Army posters, and stood up to gaze from the window. Three gardens from mine I could see the Turners'; during the day they had built their bonfire. The moon was up, it gleamed in a greenhouse like eyes. On top of the bonfire, above a toilet seat and piled planks like a gutted roof, stood the guy. Its arms were crucified across its wooden body; it swayed in a breeze. Its head turned back and forth beneath the moon, its paper face lifted to me. There was something horrible about that featureless grey expanse, as if eyes which should have been watching me were not. I drew back from the window and opened my door, for downstairs I'd heard my father say "—paraffin."

"To have a bonfire after that," my mother said, a glass clinked. "It's unfeeling. They're like animals."

"Hold on now, it wasn't ever proved," said my father. "You can't condemn someone without a fair trial."

"I know. You've only got to look at him. I know."

"Well, we'll agree to differ. Remind me tomorrow, I must buy that Beethoven."

Nothing about a trunk. In a far garden a ball of fire leapt up screaming. I picked up my history sentence, and next day, drop kicking a can to Joe, I said "What was your brother called?"

"Frankie." Savagely he kicked the can against a bus stop.

I wanted to trust him. "You never did tell me what happened," I prompted.

His eyes fastened on the can, they glazed with fear, distrust, the look I've seen before my desk when I've enquired into family backgrounds. He strode exaggeratedly to the can and crumpled it beneath his heel. Suddenly he

muttered. "We had a bonfire. It was going out. My father got a can of paraffin and we threw it on the fire. It spilled on Frankie. We called an ambulance but they didn't come in time."

I was silent; he hadn't helped my trust. "I bet they all think we're cruel round here, having a bonfire this year," Joe said.

"They don't know anything about it. Anyway, you're not," I told him. I couldn't repeat what my parents had said. I wasn't ready to oppose them.

"It was my mother's idea to have one this year. I think she wants to make me forget." Or somehow to prove to herself that she was wrong to suspect not that I made this connexion then. "I don't want to have a bonfire all by myself," Joe continued.

"You won't. I'll be there," I said. Some part of me trusted him.

At dinner on Guy Fawkes' Night, after my usual taste of table wine, I told my parents: "They've let us off homework tonight," which was true. "I'm going to see *The Bridge on the River Kwai* with some friends from school," which wasn't.

"I don't see why not," my mother said. "Joe Turner won't be there, will he?"

"No, he won't." He wouldn't.

"You won't have time to listen to this, then," my father said, reaching beneath *The Times* on the coffee table to produce Beethoven's Seventh. For a moment I was ashamed: they trusted me, they bought me presents, and I betrayed them. But they condemned Joe without ever having met him. I knew Joe, I'd seen how withdrawn his parents were from him, tonight he'd be alone if I didn't keep my word. "Thanks very much," I said, and took the record to my room.

Night had fallen, curtains glowed and shadows moved. I glanced back, but my parents weren't watching. Again I felt a twinge of shame. In the sky around me it had started, green stars sparkled blue and tell, the twinkling blue star of an ambulance swept past. I stood before the Turners' door. Mr Turner swearing, drinking, I didn't want to face that. Once more I was ashamed, if Joe could stand him, it was up to me to do so for Joe's sake. I knocked.

Mr Turner pulled the door from my grasp. "Oh, it's you," he said, falling against the door-frame, hooking his braces over his shoulder. I half expected him to close me out, but he seemed triumphant about something. "I'm not the bloody butler," he said. "Come in or don't, it's all the same to me."

I heard voices in the front room, I entered. Joe was on the floor, counting out fireworks: volcanoes, worms, wheels, stiff tailed rockets. Around him

stood boys I'd never seen before, one had a headscarved girl on his arm and was fondling her. I knew they were from Lower Brixhester. I looked at Joe, waiting to be greeted. "There you are," he said, glancing up. "These are some of my friends from where I used to live."

I felt out of place, no longer important, in a sense betrayed, I'd thought it would be Joe and me. But it was his home; it wasn't my place to judge — already I'd determined not to harden prejudice as my parents had. I tried to smile at the girl. She stared back, I suppressed my suburban accent. Ill at ease, I stood near the door, peering into the hall as Mrs Turner came downstairs. Her eyes were red, she'd been crying. She confronted her husband in the kitchen, out of sight. "Well, now you've built your bonfire, aren't you going out to watch?" she demanded.

"It was your idea, not mine, my girl. I'm not getting dressed to go out and play with all his little bastards. I've done my bit for the bonfire," he laughed.

"You're scared," she taunted. "Scared that you might see something."

"Not me, my girl. Not any more. I'm not going to hear them moving about any more."

"What are you saying?" she cried, suddenly audibly afraid—and Joe said: "Wake up everyone, time to start." We carried fireworks through the kitchen, Mr Turner's feet were on the table, he lay back with his eyes closed, smiling, his wife turned from him to us with a kind of desperation. A vest dripped on me.

The gravel path was strewn with twigs, what had been a flowerbed was now waste, heaped with wood. The girl tacked Catherine wheels to the fence, the boys staked out the soil with Guinness bottles, thrusting a rocket into each mouth. I glanced up at the bonfire against the arcs of fire among the stars, remembering the wooden figure like a witch's skeleton at the stake. "Where's the guy?" I asked Joe.

"Come on, you lot, who's got the guy?" Joe called. But everyone protested ignorance. We went back into the kitchen. "Has anyone seen our guy?" Joe asked.

"Someone must have stolen it," his mother said uneasily. "You'd think up this way they'd know better."

"After I dressed it up, too," his father mumbled, and turned quickly to his Guinness.

We searched upstairs, though I couldn't see why. Nothing beneath a rumpled double bed but curlers. Joe's room featured a battle of wooden model aeroplanes and a sharp smell of glue like paraffin. One room was an attic

dusty mirrors, footballs, boots, fractured chair legs. Behind two mirrors I found a trunk whose lock had been forced. I opened it without thinking, but it was empty. "The hell with it," Joe said finally. "It's the fireworks they've all come for, anyway."

The girl had set one wheel whirling, spurning sparks. They lit up Mrs Turner's face staring from the kitchen window before she moved away; her husband's eyes were closed, his mouth open and wheezing. Joe took a match and bent to the bonfire; fire raced up a privet twig. Above us hands of fire dulled against the night. One of the boys sent a rocket whooping into space; its falling sparks left dents of darkness on my eyes. I had no matches, I approached the boy and asked for one. He passed me a handful. Beyond the fire, now angled with planes of flame, the girl was giggling with her escort. I struck a match on my sole and counted: "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six—" when the rocket leapt. I'd forgotten to muffle my accent, but nobody cared. I was happy.

The girl came back with her escort from a region where chimneys were limned on fans of white electric fire. "The bonfire's going out," said Joe. I gave him some of my matches. Red hot flecks spun through the smoke and vanished; the smoke clogged our nostrils—it would be catarrh in the morning.

Over the houses rose a red star. It hung steady, dazzling, eternal. Our gasps and cheers were silenced. The white house walls turned red, like cardboard in a fire about to flame. As suddenly, the star sank and was extinguished, in another garden someone clapped. Everything was dimmed, Joe felt his way to the bonfire and struck matches.

Someone stood up from the corner of the house and moved behind me. I looked round, but the face was grey and formless after the star. A hand touched my arm, it seemed light as paper. The figure moved toward Joe. My sleeve was wet. I lifted it to my nose and sniffed, it was stained with paraffin. I might have called out if Joe's mother hadn't screamed.

Everyone but Joe turned startled to the kitchen. Mr Turner stirred and stared at her. "You must be bloody off your nut," he snarled, "waking me like that."

"Frankie's clothes!" she cried, trying to claw at his face. "What have you done with them?"

"I told you I'd find your trunk, my girl," he laughed, beating her off. "I thought I'd do something for the bonfire, like dressing up the guy."

She sat down at the table and sobbed. Everyone was watching, aghast, embarrassed. Our eyes were readjusting, we could see each others' red hot

faces. Suddenly, terrified, I looked toward Joe. He was kneeling by the bonfire, thrusting matches deep. My eyes searched the shadows. Near the hedge stood a Guinness bottle which should have held a rocket. Desperately, I searched beyond. A figure was creeping along the hedge toward Joe. As I discovered it, it leapt.

Joe twisted round, still kneeling, as it reached him. The fire caught; fear flared from Joe's face. His mouth gaped; so did mine as I struggled to call the others, still watching the kitchen. The figure wore trousers and a blazer, but its hands— My tongue trembled in my mouth. I caught at one boy's arm, but he pulled away. Joe's head went back; he overbalanced, clawing at the earth. The rocket plunged into his mouth; the figure's other hand fell on the bonfire. Flames blazed through its arms, down to the rocket's fuse.

The brick dug into my face; I'd clapped my hands over my ears and pressed my head against the wall. The girl ran screaming into the house. I couldn't leave the wall until I understood. Which is why each pebble is embedded in my forehead, I never left that wall. Perhaps subconsciously Joe had meant to spill the paraffin, who knows? But why had his father given it to him? Perhaps Joe had wanted it to happen, but what justice demanded that revenge? I reject it, still searching for the truth in each face before my desk while I work to release them from backgrounds like my own and Joe Turner's. The office tomorrow, thank God.

When the strongest of us went unwillingly toward what lay by the bonfire, away from the screams and shouting in the kitchen and the smoking Guinness bottles, we found a papier-maché hand.

THE OLD HORNS

"Look at that wood," George said, standing above Eve as she lay on the hillock. "Can't you just imagine satyrs chasing nymphs through the undergrowth, catching them in the shadows."

I looked toward the trees. dappled shifting sunlight, soft hollows and rises resilient with pine-needles.

Eve laughed and looked in the other direction. "But why The Old Horns?" she persisted.

"It sounds like a legend," George suggested. "Horns played by satyrs, a pagan orgy, revellers lying sated on the sand—a bit like us in fact—virgins dancing toward the man of their choice—"

I sat up; my poem was disintegrating. "Paganism wasn't like that," I interrupted, raising my voice. "It degraded the body. It didn't release you, it dragged you down into itself. It rotted you."

"Who asked you?" George said.

I lay back, clutching a bottle of home-made wine. The sun swelled behind my eyelids, fermenting my brain. George and Eve whispered on the hillock to my left. Away on the right, where the grassy mounds became dunes, I could hear the others, friends of mine but blurred by alcohol—several girls and women carefully avoiding George, two children chasing, men who frowned at George but, like myself, never intervened. I gave myself up to the sunlight, the rustling grasses.

I thought:

To walk on needles sharp as scattered combs.

No, that was inappropriate.

Pines like arrows to the sky, the sea's reflection.

Dunes.

But beyond the dunes lay The Old Horns, disguised as soft sand. Last week when we'd discussed the picnic, someone had mentioned the name. We'd decided at once; it sounded authentically mysterious. It was part of the beach, but we'd convinced ourselves that sand was half the fun, sand sprinkled on the garlicwurst like salt, sand crunching between the Camembert and crackers. We hadn't known about The Old Horns. At noon we'd come upon it; one of the children, scampering ahead toward the beach, had screamed and sunk into what had seemed a dune. We'd pulled her free, her legs were clothed in socks of brown mud. Surveying warily, our eyes sharpened by the sunlight, we'd noticed that the dunes ahead were no longer the rich brown of wet sand, but the festering richness of rotting wood. "Keep close to me, you two," Thora called to her children. We turned back, when we wanted the beach we'd go round. I examined the place as we hurried back to where the grey fungi, suddenly apparent everywhere, gave way to grass. The deceptive stain had leaked toward the beach, toward the dunes, toward the pines which curved round but hung back, their roots thick with the mud as if advanced tentatively and caught. Just inside the curve of the pines I saw the dull glint of a pool. We came to firmer ground. "Tobacco waste," suggested someone, thinking of the factory we'd passed a mile away that morning, brown and rough and moist as chewed tobacco. "Donkey dung," George had laughed. Lying on my hillock, I felt my poem choked by The Old Horns; it was as though something had suffocated or was stirring feebly in its own filth, clogged, encrusted. When I'd looked back I couldn't see the child's footprints, all trace of her had been engulfed.

Water left to catch the leaves, to photograph the trees.

Eve screamed. I jerked erect to see her pulling away from George, who fell flat on the grass. "Protect me," she pleaded, running to me.

"Of course. Have some wine." I wiped the mouth of the bottle and passed it to her; she drank, then lay back. "It's not so comfortable here," she complained.

"Use this as a pillow," I suggested, extending my arm.

"It might be hard," she said, getting up and standing between the hillocks.

"Come on, baby," George called, straightening his open-necked shirt, "we're all friends here."

Baulked of Eve, I felt rising to my lips the insult I'd conceived last time George had grabbed a girl. I tried to hold it in. Last time, when I hadn't spoken, I'd seen that George's way with women merely shielded a kind of

emotional impotence, a lack of real relationships an emotional void which might be filled by lust or by the civil servant's blind devotion to duty, or in George's case both. "Must you walk round with your emotional fly unbuttoned?" I blurted.

Eve laughed, George's grin withdrew into its shell. My poem was ruined, I stood up unsteadily, emptied my bottle and joined the others

One of Thora's and Ken's children was goading a doll to climb a dune. The doll was clockwork; it clumped up the inclined sand, tilted and fell back. I was chilled by it: motion without soul. Ken was measuring his home-made wine into paper cups. "Where are George and Eve? Oh, well," he said, and filled a cup for me. We stood talking above the prostrate bodies in the sunlight.

Thora's other child ran down to her. "Mummy, mummy, on the beach!"

"What, dear?"

"Someone playing with a big red balloon with a face on it! I saw it over the june!"

"Dune, dear, dune."

The mist inflated the sun as it set.

"The minibus is breathing its last," Ken told the sunbathers. "Hope it lives until we reach the country club."

George appeared, combing sand from his hair. "Bet I know what's wrong with it," he said, and explained.

"You know, you may be right," Ken agreed. "Have some wine and we'll take a look."

They strode off toward the road which led to The Old Horns. I stood among the eyes closed against the sun, the faces streaked with sweat and sand. Off to my right the sea whispered glittering, over the dunes to the left rose the pines, ahead, invisible behind a rise, spread The Old Horns. I sipped the wine, making it last.

George and Ken returned. "Well done, George," Ken called out. "We've operated on the minibus."

"I may leave early," George said. "I want to watch Julie Christie on tv."

"What's wrong, George, anti-social?" I shouted. "Isn't anyone being friendly today?" But nobody laughed.

"That's the last of the wine," Ken intoned.

Bodies stirred to protest. Someone sat up and pulled out a pack of cards.

"Oh, not cards," Eve said, coming round a dune. She glanced at George, then at me, a stray wind thrilled trembling through her sleeves. "Let's have a game of hide and seek."

Voices mumbled assent; the others stood, brushing sand from their clothes "Who's going to chase who?" George asked.

"The girls will chase the boys," decided Eve.

"One guess where I'll be," George said, winking

"You two can play," Thora silenced cries, "but only if you promise to stay away from the quicksand."

"We'll give you a hundred!" Eve called.

"Don't you go after Ken," laughed Thora. "He's mine."

"One, two, three—" the women chanted.

With the rest, I ran. I rounded a dune and doubled back. I crouched low over two more and could no longer hear the chant. The sun hung close to the sea. I dropped into a hollow at the edge of the beach. The hundred must be up. I lay on my side. A long-legged spider straggled before my face, it scabbled frantically over the sand, conquered the dune and vanished. Faint cries of triumph came from somewhere. Ahead along the beach. The Old Horns suffocated my thoughts. I thought of George, waiting in the shade beneath the pines for Eve. Keep away, I willed him, don't disturb me. I cupped sand, let it trickle, become one with the dune. I caught up the grains with indistinguishable others. They were warm, lulling. It seemed they'd never end.

The others had gone. In the evening the sea whisked foam high and retreated. It was cold in the hollow. I stretched and rose. Then I heard the music: on the beach, low wet dissonances with a jagged jerking rhythm. I climbed toward it, from the top of the dune I'd be able to see. The sand sank beneath me, my feet flung wildly. I reached the rise and stared toward the beach.

Once I'd seen a film of a festival in, I think, Mexico. gay crowds had filled the streets, and above them had lumbered great heads, painted grinning mouths, blind eyes, monsters shaken with slow mechanical mirth. I felt now the horror I'd felt then. On the beach, at the edge of The Old Horns, figures were prancing, leaping in a puppet's parody of joy. Their heads—no, they couldn't be heads: on their shoulders were set huge paper masks like balloons, nodding horribly, their grinning mouths stretched wide as if bloated from within. The masks were the color of The Old Horns: heads inflated by mud, glimmering red now in the sunset. The music came from swaying pipes thrust in the stretched mouths; thick notes drooled. Whatever the pipes were made of, it must have been rotten, one disintegrated as I watched, fell softly and merged with The Old Horns. There might have been a dozen of the stamping

figures; I was terrified, but something drew me closer. Some wore robes as in a pagan ritual, some were dressed in Victorian suits; one wore trousers and an open-necked shirt. As I came near the stain which was The Old Horns, this figure turned its glistening unsteady head to me.

My choked scream woke me. I struggled to my feet and ran toward the pines, slithering down avalanches of sand, not looking back toward the beach. I had to reach the woods; they were too close to The Old Horns, Eve might be on the edge. I plunged into the forest, falling down slopes sharp with pine-needles, toward the pool I'd seen glinting. At the far end of an avenue I saw its dull reflexion. On my right, toward The Old Horns, the needles had decayed; great slabs of fungus crawled up the trees. I came panting to the pool. The avenue was blocked by a rotted tree, a precarious path formed a rim about the water and led up to a rise beyond. "Eve!" I called, my cry was muffled by the fungus. Something in the pool caught my eye. I peered through the needles surrounded by scum. Deep in the water was something I had taken to be the floor of the pool. But it couldn't be—it was a huge face drawn in curling mud, gigantic wet pits for eyes, a grinning mouth whose lips crumbled and smoked in the water. I felt its power, it was The Old Horns, creeping from its temple of mud on the beach, sleeping wakefully in the pool, oozing into the trees through their roots. I flinched back from the water, and in the reflexion I saw a dark balloon bob into sight over my shoulder. My head plunged underwater. The face swirled and poured into my mouth and nostrils. Agony ate through my brain, burning it like acid, swelling my cheeks until I grinned.

I was clutching at the hollow near the beach. Sand pierced beneath my nails like needles. My face was in the sand, suffocating. I don't know why, but as I swept the grains from my cheeks I thought of those honey-colored eggs one finds on old wood. I leapt up. The sun bulged red on the horizon, against it dunes charred like cardboard. My thoughts retreated from the nightmare. I didn't go to look at the beach. I glanced uneasily around the hollow, and heard a cry of joy from the direction of the pines. Eventually I found them, they'd discovered a last bottle.

Eve handed me a paper cup and I gulped down the wine. "Where did you go that we couldn't find you?" she asked.

"Never thought we'd see you playing hide and seek!" Thora told me.

"Has anyone seen George?" Ken called.

"I couldn't find him either," pouted Eve.

"Mummy, the big balloon went into the pond!"

"I told you to stay away from there," Thora said, slapping her.

Ken kicked sand and ran up a dune. "George!" he shouted above the child's cries. Everyone was standing sated in the blue evening, finishing the wine, eager for the country club. Suddenly we all were shouting "George!" from dunes, "George!" into the woods, "George!" toward the beach, "George!" from the edge of The Old Horns until I shivered and hurried back.

"He said he was going home to watch tv," said Thora.

"That's right, he did," remembered Ken, relieved. "Onward to the minibus, then."

We piled in and drove through the stone gateposts, down the rutted road. The pines followed us, swaying in the wind.

The waiters at the country club frowned as we entered, treading sand like holy footprints on the carpet. Ken invoked his membership. The lights were muted, the music more so. The waiters set places at the table, and we congregated at the bar.

"There must be a legend of pagan orgies at The Old Horns," I said to the barman. Everyone looked at me.

"Wouldn't know about that, sir," he said. "The kids round here dare each other to go up there at night. Don't know what they get up to once they're there."

We sat down. "I won't be a minute," Eve called, talking at the bar to a man playing with his old school tie. The wine waiter placed lists before the ladies. Never thought they'd see me playing hide and seek, indeed. I knew they liked my introversion as little as they liked George. "You can't be going?" Thora protested. She seemed genuine. "I thought I said," I told them. "I want to watch Julie Christie on tv."

It took me an hour to walk back to The Old Horns. Sometimes I dawdled, gnawed by fear, sometimes I drove myself onward, determined to prove myself wrong. Ahead of me cars lit up naves of branches. Once I heard a cry among the omnipresent pines, perhaps an owl, once a star was hidden by a branch. I watched for it, but it never reappeared.

I plodded up the road toward The Old Horns. For a moment the moon ornamented the gatepost like a globe, glistening green rays ran down the stone like luminous paint. I wasn't impressed by the poetry. Through the posts I turned into the forest, the moon was caught by reaching twigs and dragged down.

The scent of pine sharpened the cold air. The first shadow fell across my path, my feet ventured into darkness and snapped needles, shattering the

silence. The pines supported the dark sky, but night welled richly in my wake. Glancing between the too-quiet trunks, I made my way down the avenue toward the pool.

Among the trees a pale globe grinned as it moved with me. I glanced up, my heart pounding—but it was the moon, tangled in the branches like a spider's cocoon. As I looked away, I caught a movement beneath the moon.

Nothing could have moved. There was little wind: too little to trouble what seemed to be a decayed trunk, fat and brown in the shadows. I had to know. I thrust between the trees, grasping cold fungus and shuddering, and reached what I'd seen. There was nothing: merely a space between the trunks. "George!" I called.

Branches snapped ahead of me. Far down the dim perspective of trees a figure was prancing toward the pool. It's George, I thought, trying to forget he was drunk and now he's wakened, he's ashamed. I plunged in pursuit. Low branches ripped my face; I put up my hands to protect myself and found them smeared with blobs of clay or mud. At every step a branch tried to tear my face. Ahead the figure leapt like a doll jerked by a cripple, it was further away than before. I couldn't see its head in the shadows. It seemed to be singing thickly—or was it screaming? I couldn't tell, the voice was choked. Suddenly a moonbeam found the head. It was in proportion, but it glistened, it was coated with mud. Suppressing my thoughts, I ran faster, beating off the branches, my hands wet with mud scraped from something.

Just as I was close the figure pranced free of the forest. It had reached the pool. The moon-white water darkened for a moment, then shone unobstructed. I came out into the clearing. Swarms of black flies scintillated above the pool. I peered about. The path was deserted, nothing moved except the glittering flies, unless there was a figure creeping through the trees on the edge of the path. I began to pick my way around the pool toward the rise beyond. Terror took me. I couldn't balance above the water. I threw myself back, unable to complete the circuit either way, and looked down into the pool.

The moon was there, floating on the scum like a stone from beneath which something might crawl. It dazzled whatever lay beneath. A bubble of mud rose to the surface and burst.

Even when I heard movement I couldn't look away. I didn't need to. Inverted in the pool, a figure burst forth from the trees at the far edge of the path. I heard something collide dully with a heavy branch. The figure, silent now, danced jerkily up the rise like a chicken in its death spasm. At the top it

met the moon. It stood struggling still to dance, it threw up the arms of its open-necked shirt in a final gesture of joy. Its inversion gave me a chance not to believe what I saw; the moon balanced on the space between the shoulders. Then it fell back into the pool. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, only needles whirled in the water. Already the flies were gathering.

I backed away from the pool. A trunk thrust against my shoulders. All at once I turned and smashed my way out of the forest, accepting the blows of branches, trying to abort the embryo of guilt. I fell out between two pines, and the moon sailed up, equivocally free at last.

Poetry had won.

THE LOST

It was in Rudesheim that I had my first important insight into Bill's character. The previous night, outside Koblenz, we had caught a bus in an unsuccessful attempt to find the town centre and when our three marks fare ran out had been abandoned in the country, by a filling station railed off by leaping brilliant rain. I'd been sure there had been hefty figures following us as we walked into the stinging darkness—but Bill had seen a bus heading back to our hotel: he hadn't wanted a fight. So we'd joined the rest of our coach party that morning. Chair-lifts were strung down a hillside of vineyards to Rudesheim, I stood up until Bill protested, although I had already seen that there could be no danger at all unless you fell on one of the vine poles. Our courier led us down into Rudesheim, through the contorted cobbled streets of aproned women selling souvenirs, between tables full of tankards and huge packed laughing Germans, and into an inn. Here Bill revealed himself.

They hadn't reserved a table for our party, they scattered us among a group of tables, leaving a seat free at mine and Bill's. They gave us a menu in Gothic script and a leaflet of drinking songs. Our courier was trying to persuade us to sing along with a tenor shouting out the words to a trap drum and organ, but Bill said "We've been organized away from everything I wanted to see. This is my first tour and my last."

"Sorry, Bill," I said.

"I didn't mean it was your fault. I wanted to come."

I supposed he had, although I suspected Dyls had persuaded him. I hadn't seen either of them for ten years, they had moved so much around London that I hadn't been able to track them down. In fact, I hadn't seen them since soon after my parents died. But at last I'd found them in the telephone

directory, hiding in Hampstead. I'm sure they were pleased to see me, and when I mentioned that there was an extra seat on the tour I was taking Dyls had said: "Why don't you go, Bill? You need a holiday." She would be teaching, I'd gathered that early in the evening. Later I'd heard her whisper "Go on, Bill. He obviously wants you to, and you haven't seen him in years. You'll have a lot to talk about."

Well, we did, I talked about changes in the Civil Service and how difficult it was to gain promotion if I'd wanted to, he told me about advertising. But just when I was ready to explain how the other people in the office had conspired to weigh me down with the duller work, an American GI heard our English and took the other seat at our table.

I don't recall much of what he said, I was annoyed by the interruption and was surveying the inn, the clocks like intricate pastry, the little drinkers carved in niches on the walls, a group on the other side of the raftered room rising obsessively to their feet and raising tankards. But after we'd all had a few glasses of wine the American—who was a GI from the base outside Frankfurt—said "Nights in Saigon we used to go in the rooftop restaurant and watch the tracers. It was like the Fourth of July."

I could sympathize with him, I feel outside most things that aren't happening to me, an observer, rather as I imagine a writer must feel. I sometimes wish I were a writer, it must be overwhelming to build up characters who will do what you want them to do, instead of having to wait for the right moment with people. As I say, I could sympathize, but Bill cracked the stem of his glass on the table and splattered "I suppose you also view every Vietnamese you get in your sights as some sort of television show!"

"Goddamn it, did you ever go to Vietnam? Hah?" the GI shouted. "Well, you wanna go out there before you tell us what we should do? How'd you like it if we told you how to run your country? Hah?"

"Somebody ought to," Bill said conversationally. "London's a madhouse."

"Jesus! You wanna sell out your own country? You want the Germans to run your country, right?"

"All I'm saying," Bill told him, "is that my experience of London tells me that anything can fester there unnoticed. There are too many nooks and hidey-holes."

"Listen, let's get rid of all this crap! What do you want, you wanna take the Germans back with you when you go?"

"Not at all. I was persuaded to come on this trip," Bill said. He glanced at

me. "I didn't mean by you, Don," he apologized. "Dilys insisted that I take a holiday. I wanted to come. It's just that I wish she were here."

He'd successfully shaken off the GI. Perhaps he had meant me; I didn't know, I didn't mind—if he were against me so much the better. We finished the meal in silence and made our way back to the coach. At three o'clock the sun was high and men were vomiting beside the Rhine.

As we boarded the coach Bill said. "I've been thinking. What you bought at Nürnberg—"

I clenched my face and nodded at the courier's back.

When we'd sat down he continued. "I was only going to say that you could hide it in the bottom of my case. I don't think the Customs would find it there."

"If it comes to that," I amended. "I may leave it somewhere."

The coach ploughed forward into the sunlight toward Frankfurt. People began to pack their jackets onto the luggage-rack. Far back down the bus a cup and saucer clinked, for an uneasy second I was on a lawn. Our courier switched on her microphone and concealing most of her German accent, demanded: "Now, how long is the length of the Rhine? Who can tell me that?"

"She's a nice kid," Bill muttered, "but I wish she wouldn't do that."

She was pleasant enough but I was worried that she never removed her headscarf, it was like the raised visor of an orange suit of armour. When she spoke to us away from the coach her voice seemed tinny, as if she had a microphone wired into her throat, a grille in place of teeth. I watched her often and her movements seemed jerky, isolated, they lacked flow, like a robot's. In so many people I knew I could sense nothing, their movements were robotic too—all you had to do was to wait for the right movement and you could direct them. Not at all like Dilys. "How's Dilys?" I asked Bill.

"As I've said, she's fine."

"Happy?"

"Of course. What do you mean?"

I'd been half joking, I regretted having asked, "It's just that I haven't seen either of you for so long. I'm interested," I said.

I'd known Bill at school in Chelsea and for some years afterward. I was living with my parents off the King's Road, the night the car crashed and the police were waiting awkwardly when I came home from the pub I didn't know what to do except phone Bill. He visited me most nights for a month or so; the last few times he brought Dilys, and all at once there was perfume and

cooking and a great deal more laughter in the house. One night he was working and she came alone. I took her out to dinner but afterwards, back at the house, I suffered a night of misunderstandings. Three months later she was engaged to Bill, six months later they were married. I couldn't believe Bill's ease with her. After that they rarely visited me, at least not after I came out of hospital.

The courier's voice nibbled at castles on stroked and ruffled hillsides as we coasted by beneath them. We cruised past women in bright bunched peasant dresses like painted sheaves of corn, hitch-hikers with bulging canvas rucksacks and their socks rolled over their trousers or their knees red beneath shining leather shorts, hot bright cottages with their roofs striving ever upward, typically Germanic. I can't describe architecture, but everyone's been to see *The Sound of Music*, even if they only go for a cuddle on the back row. I say a cuddle, but you know what I mean. Behind me I could hear fragments of conversation like thumbled radio wavebands. "All you have to do is hit them on the nose. Roll up a newspaper and tap them on the nose. They don't like being tapped on the nose."

Bill was asleep with his mouth hanging open. I almost photographed him. Instead I watched the scenery, although now we'd reached miles of featureless green, where I couldn't think. When I say I feel outside most things I don't mean I don't take notice. I just wait for things to fit together.

When we reached Frankfurt night was falling. I wasn't sure that I saw a great bottle of beer floating above the city. I had, it was a huge balloon. Moments later, as the lights began to blaze in our wake along a main street as if we'd touched them off, I saw a totem-pole striding toward me down a side street. It was a child stacked on his father's shoulders. The bus stalled at a traffic light, and a woman in a doorway swung a key and smiled at me, next to her shoulder hang a 3-D nude photograph on a postcard stand, like a window in the air, like a thought which she was trying to force on me. From a pram at the kerb I heard an incessant wailing like the cry of a siren. I imagined no face above the humped blanket, just a gaping metal mouth with lockjaw. I mustn't have had enough sleep; things weren't fitting together.

I was glad when we drew up before the hotel and Bill awoke. The hotel was high and modern. Behind dark wooden counters like polished packing-cases, waiters in dinner-suits passed out keys and called in porters. They had my name and address wrong again—my writing had deteriorated since my parents died—but I didn't correct them. We made our way behind a porter, hurrying to the lift to keep his balance with our cases. We must have paid

most of our money for this hotel, I even saw a foyer bookshop where I caught sight of *Fanny Hill* and several de Sades. As we waited for the lift a man in shorts leaned over a girl on a circular seat and said, "How long have you been here? You could have come upstairs if you were at a loose end."

Our room had two deep beds and strip lighting, pure mirrors and its own blinding white bathroom. Bill unwrapped his free soap and emerged from the bathroom masked by the towel as he rubbed "My God, Don, don't drum your fingers like that, you'll wear your nails off," he said.

He switched on the radio and found the Beatles singing in German. I remembered Beatles songs through portable radios across Hampstead Heath as I'd walked back from their flat, catching the rain in my outstretched hands. I went out on the balcony and stared at the sunset, curling over the edge of the city like burning sheets of paper. As I gripped the balustrade my fingers found a niche in the concrete. "What shall we do then, Bill?" I called.

"I'd like another Weiner Schnitzel."

I came back into the room and swung up my camera from the bed. "That's all right, but I mean, since it's Frankfurt we could find a couple of women afterwards. You don't have to search here."

"Not for me, thanks. You can put that camera down too, mate," he said. "You needn't think you'd be taking pictures."

I threw the camera back on the pillow. "What makes you think I've sunk to that level?" I said plaintively.

"Don't take everything so seriously, mate. I know you're all right."

"Then what shall we do?" I asked again.

"You won't have any fingernails left in a minute. I tell you what I'd like to do—find that beer we had in Munich."

As I washed my face I kept catching sight of Bill in the mirror, sitting on the bed. I rubbed soap into my eyes to stimulate my brain. I couldn't think what he reminded me of. At last I had it. I came out grinning. "Let's find a Weiner Schnitzel for you, Bill!" I shouted. Of course he looked like a man in the condemned cell.

In the foyer we browsed in the bookshop. The girl smiled at us from the top of a ladder, I noticed that her thighs were mottled with bruises. We emerged into the street. Panels of light were propped against the tops of store windows. As we passed a side street two women came alert and followed us for several blocks until they were replaced by others. On the next main street trams clanked by, where they connected with the overhead wire a spark spat

like a burning hair, greatly amplified. For me certain things are intensified to the exclusion of many others. And quite rightly: one must concentrate or founder.

We followed the tram-lines into the heart of the city, past the station, grim faces peering into themselves, heads withdrawing into the ground on an escalator, boys buying what looked like black sealing-wax, a Wimpy Bar opposite. "I don't think we should eat round here," I said to Bill. In open bars on corners gross figures munched immense hamburgers, girls so young I couldn't believe it sat on high stools with their tight skirts pulled up. In a square a fountain flickered like a close-packed chatter of luminous ghosts. The tram-wires gave out, but we strode on. "We'll find that beer for you to have with your Schnitzel," I promised Bill as he panted and grumbled.

At last I saw a menu in a scrolled bright window on the corner of a dark alley. "There," I said.

Beneath the lamps like dim inverted amber blossoms, more high stools stood close to a dark bar. On the walls, haloes of leaves surrounded the lamps and boisterous engravings. A few circular tables, their surfaces encircled by whorls of the tree-trunk like frozen ripples, were scattered in the darker reaches of the hot room choked by smoke and by a heavy mass of shouted conversation. Bill and I sat at one. I pressed my back against the hard ornate chair to stop the Germans from rising to the roof like balloons. A man in a bulging stained apron said "Nacht" expansively and handed us menus. But I nodded to Bill to say "Zwei Weiner Schnitzels, bitte." I knew virtually no German, although I once had a friend at school who could swear in six languages; I spent nights remembering the words.

I ate my Weiner Schnitzel and watched the bar, Bill was protestingly silent because they hadn't had the beer he wanted. Ahead of me a girl sat with her skirt spread around the stool and hanging down. I was fascinated. She seemed to be with three overflowing men. She must have known when eyes were watching her wherever they were, just as I do, for she turned and stared at me. I tried to smile, but my mouth felt like that of a tragic mask. She said something to the man on her right, and he swung round trailing smoke, his cigar like a blackened gun barrel, to train his gaze on me.

I knew he was hostile, I always do. I stared at him, pressing my lips together with my fingers to stop them trembling, willing my eyes to burn out his. Bill's head was bent on his food. I couldn't speak. Then the man's two companions glanced at him, turned and supported his gaze. It wasn't fair. I could feel myself dwindling.

Suddenly I remembered words I began to shout at them. "Verfluchte mal! Blutziniger Affe! Scheisskerl!"

Bill stared at me, astonished. I felt his gaze, but I was hypnotized by the three men. Slowly they got down from their stools, like hippopotami sliding down a river-bank. There was about three yards between us, but they were closing in slowly, inexorably. They would crush me.

I tried and failed to look at Bill. I rubbed my hands down the insides of my thighs as I had before I was caned at school, helplessly furious, I knew it was wrong that he should have the cane as if he were superior, that my mother should have to go to the headmaster because my father wouldn't, that they should crush me. It was like being herded in by hippopotami, but one had a duelling scar, another had a red ear pressed out to twice its size. And that ear was flapping toward me. If it touched me I would scream.

Then Bill pushed back his chair and strode between us. What he did then I thought brilliant in its way, he faced them and let his right hand rest negligently bulging his trousers pocket.

"Round behind me, Don. I'll move with you," he hissed. A part of me was furious, he of all people shouldn't be in control now, he shouldn't be enjoying the situation.

I circled his axis to the door. He backed away toward me—but I hadn't opened the door, and he pulled his empty right hand into view too soon. The three men started. Words poured from them like beer. I shouldered open the door. "Run!" I yelled.

We ran the wrong way down the alley, past women drooping from doorways, as a plane throbbed overhead and drowned any sounds of pursuit. I ducked left into another alley, running headlong into a nightwind like an icy pillow. Bill was treading on my heels. I flung myself across into another alley, I was sure we were heading back toward the hotel. Shirts flapped repetitively from a balcony, and behind me I could hear the forced padding and panting of the three men and Bill. Then light tore the labyrinthine blackness. I threw myself out of the alley into a main street before a slowing tram.

"Is that our tram?" I demanded, pointing, as Bill lurched out beside me.

"Quick!" he yelled and sprinted.

"No," I said, "that's not our tram." Unless I was mistaken it plunged out beyond the edge of the city. But Bill continued running. I moulded myself into a nearby doorway. After a moment I saw the three men pop forth from

the alley into the light like balloons and bounce after him. If I'd called out they would have seen me, of course. They bounded aboard and the tram moved off. As I raced to stand between the lines where it had been I saw Bill thrown back and forth in the globular mirror of the tram, jostled by the three men like fish in a bowl. I'm sure they have those mirrors on German trams.

On my way back to the hotel I was pursued by a woman. I waved her off, sometimes on the darkest nights I would look for them in Hampstead when they weren't there, but now I wanted to keep myself pure. I debated whether to stay in the hotel bar for a while. I decided not; I needed sleep, and there was a telephone in my room. As I washed my face I glimpsed the empty bed in the mirror. There seemed to be some extra significance in this, but it eluded me. I undressed, and my Nürnberg souvenir fell to the carpet. I thought and hid it in the niche on the balcony. Then I went to bed. I think I wondered what I would say if the telephone rang, if they would understand me. Mind you, Bill could speak only half a dozen words of German.

The next morning I told the courier that Bill hadn't returned. Obviously I couldn't describe what had happened, I said he'd gone off with a woman around eleven o'clock. She shook her head sadly. I gave her a pound and said that I felt bound to leave the tour and stay in Frankfurt. Sadly she departed. Some hours later I took a taxi to the airport for the next plane to London.

Though it was a rush for the plane, almost at the airport I remembered that I'd left my Nürnberg souvenir in the balcony niche. They might presume that it was mine, and wrong address or not, it might reach me. So I had the taxi return, screeching and manoeuvring along the autobahn, and said I'd left my suitcase keys. At first they wouldn't let me in the room, but the porter closed his eyes and his fist on a pound. I ran into the room and found the niche. I would hardly need my souvenir now. I was glad, had it proved necessary then explanations to Dilys would have been much more difficult. Which they may still turn out to be, of course. But I can wait. That's something I'm good at.

I threw the knife as far as I could. It fell with a dull clunk on a roof below, and I thought of Jack the Ripper. Not because I wanted to be another, I'm sure. It was another idea trying to make itself felt, for I remembered how a thought had hung about the house for weeks after my misunderstanding with Dilys. How all women must be alike and yet it had to be Dilys. I'd missed my chance of finding out then; but not this time.

THE STOCKING

The phone rang.

"Phone's ringing," Tom said.

"Yes, well?" Shiela countered.

"You get it, I'm too tired."

"Are you tired, Tompuss?" called Tina in mock sympathy.

"Let's toss for it."

"Go on, Tom, answer it," said Shiela. "You'll have Mr Tubb telling us off again."

Wearily he lifted the receiver. A girl repeated "Hello? Hello?" He brandished the receiver: "It's for you, anyway."

"Bridget?" Shiela greeted, lowering her voice. "And where were *you* last night? . . . Now you know I don't like to go out on my own . . . Well, you'll never guess who I went out with! . . . Yes, that's right . . . Oh, fabulous, he took me to that club . . . Yes, he drove me home . . . You know I wouldn't normally, but he's different . . . And how did *you* go on? . . ."

Tom fixed his eyes on his work, he always felt depressed by these conversations of Shiela's. But he was not to be left undisturbed. Tina was in a happy mood today, obviously she'd "had a good night", as she was fond of telling them. Now she called: "Why are you tired, Tompuss?"

"Lack of sleep, Mrs McLaine."

"Hectic night?"

"Now, Tina, don't corrupt Shiela."

"No, but seriously, Tom, have you ever?" She raised an eyebrow.

"What?" He felt trapped.

"Do you often?"

"Often what?"

"Can you?"

"*Can't* you, Tom?" said Shiela in his ear, having finished her conversation.

"Now don't be naughty." He spanked her and she squealed. He was released. Tina arched her eyebrows. "Kinky," she commented. "Yes," said Shiela with a long look at Tom, and went back to her desk.

When he left for home that night, Tom dawdled on the pavement near the entrance to an alley which he knew Shiela used as a short cut. He saw her leave the building, and ducked into the alley. Soon he heard her high heels on the cobbles, overtaking him. "Aren't you speaking to me?" he asked as she passed.

"Oh, hello, Tom, I didn't see you." They picked their way between the dustbins, crushed cartons and locked back doors of two main streets. One black door, half off its hinges, creaked in shadow. Shiela pressed close to Tom. "What's wrong?" he enquired.

"Oh, that door. It's always open when I come by. It frightens me. Silly, really."

"I didn't know you were the nervous type."

"I am, you know." They emerged into a square, bright as day between blazing store windows. Shiela's bus was swallowing its queue. "See you tomorrow," she said, and ran. Tom began to walk to the traffic lights where the bus might be halted. It was, and he waved, but Shiela did not see him.

Next morning she had made the coffee, a cup awaited Tom when he arrived. He sipped it down, his eyes on Shiela, then carried it round to her desk. "Thanks, kitten," he said.

"Ready for work?" Mr Tubb called, striding past.

Tom and Shiela swapped grimaces. She stretched back in her chair, arms behind her head, closed her eyes and yawned. He tickled her armpit. She squeaked and squirmed out of reach. His fingers followed.

"At it early, children?" Tina commented, sitting down to repair one eyebrow before her compact mirror.

"Never miss an opportunity," Tom replied. His fingertips continued. Shiela had worked herself almost into a knot, one leg hooked around the corner of her desk. "Oo—" she protested yet again. Then "*Oh*"—a genuine protest. She shoved back her chair and gazed at her leg. "Now look, my stocking's laddered."

"I'm sorry, Shiela," Tom apologized, trying to insinuate regret into his gaze as he took in her legs. "Get some at dinnertime and I'll give you the money."

"It's all right, Tom, I had to buy a pair anyway."

"No, come on, I insist."

"Thanks, Tom, but I'd really rather you didn't."

"You're just finishing your break, are you?" suggested Mr Tubb

Shiela stretched the laddered stocking before her face and peeked at Tom. "Thanks," he said, holding out his hand. She hesitated. "Go on, Shiela, if he wants it," Tina urged. Shrugging, Shiela balled the stocking and tossed it to him. Smiling at her, he impaled it with a pin and hung it from the corner of his desk. Mr Tubb cleared his throat. Shiela's head went down. Now and then Tom fingered the stocking, glancing up at Shiela. Tina watched him.

"Make me some coffee, Tompuss," Tina said.

He was spooning the ingredients from jars on the window-ledge, blank morning fog walled them in. "I can only carry two cups," he explained.

"Well, I'm here, you're here, so make ours."

"No, I must look after Shiela," and he did so. She was at her desk when he returned, leafing through a women's magazine with Tina. Tom waited for her to turn to him, then handed her the cup. His fingers lingered among hers.

"Are you holding my hand, Tom?" she asked.

His hand, found out, retreated and was suspended for a moment in mid air. Her neck showed between her cardigan and hair. Tom's fingers found the gap and stroked. They progressed upward, lifting her hair, it was a gesture such as he might have used to sweep up her skirt.

Tina's fingers closed round her cup as she rose. "I'm embarrassed," she told them. "It's like watching you courting."

"We were innocent until you came, Mrs Libido," he replied.

"At least I brought you two together, then. When are you getting married?"

"Oh, sure!" said Shiela.

"You really killed that," Tom followed, and sat down with his coffee. Tina smiled mysteriously. At that moment Mr Tubb entered through the door beneath the clock, his temper and his winter cold were suffering from fog. Tina sat down again.

Later, gusts of rain cleared away the fog and plastered newspapers against the pane. Nobody went out at lunchtime. Tom unpacked his sandwiches and ate, trying to conceal the sound of chewing. Shiela rustled pages in the silence, Tina stubbed out a cigarette and began to knit. Mr Tubb coughed. Tom heard only the pages turning onward. The thought possessed him that both he and

Shiela had scoffed at Tina's observation; could Shiela be concealing a desire as deep as his?

"That'll go stale," Shiela said beside him. He started, he could not remember how long he'd been holding the half-eaten sandwich. He gnawed at it and she picked up the phone.

"Is that Bridget? . . . Look, I can't make it tomorrow . . . No, it's terrible, he's in hospital . . . Appendix . . . Yes, I'm going tonight . . . Of course, except Thursdays, because then visiting's in the afternoon . . . The hospital across the field . . . I *do* get frightened! . . . Yes, seriously! Thinking of what happened to that girl last week, and that was in the street . . . I'm still as frightened, but this is different, I've got to go . . ."

"Why don't you ask Shiela out?"

Tom went cold. Tina had whispered the question, and he could not be sure if Shiela had heard. He forced himself to look; she seemed intent on the receiver. Tina was watching for an answer. "Yes, why not?" he managed, and smiled and nodded violently. Then he picked up a sandwich and began to chew, keeping his eyes on the food, feeling mercilessly exposed to Tina's gaze. Shiela replaced the phone and left his side. Slowly his face cooled, but he could not think. He reached out and caressed the stocking

That night he loitered at the mouth of Shiela's alley, but in vain. Eventually he turned down the alley, walking slowly, letting the wall of fog precede him and reveal each remembered door and cobblestone. Silence isolated his footsteps. Suddenly he stopped, a black door had loomed up on his left, rustily ajar. The shifting obscure walls cut them off together. Tom hesitated, then he took out a box of matches and, dragging the door further open, squeezed inside.

"I hope you two enjoyed yourselves last night," Tina smiled radiantly at Tom and Shiela as she combed the fog from her hair.

"Of course," Tom said.

"I went to the hospital," explained Shiela, "then back across the field. It was terribly creepy. Sort of thing you'd have liked, Tom. But I didn't really mind."

"How was he?" Tina asked.

Tom stirred his coffee, deliberately blotting out their conversation. When he put down the cup, Tina was remarking "New perfume?"

"Yes, *L'Imprevu*."

Later, Mr Tubb coughed over next week's time sheet and pinned it up

Tina rose to scrutinize it. Returning, she called "That reminds me, Shiela, did you realize you'd be working alone tomorrow night? I can't work Thursdays."

"Oh, no." Shiela's eyes widened. "Tom, work tomorrow night."

"Well, I don't know." He did, but liked to be persuaded

"Go on, Tom, keep Shiela company."

"All right, pussycat, I'll stay with you," he said, not minding Tina's knowing grin.

The moon grinned down mysteriously. Lying in the stripe of moonlight painted on his bed, Tom closed his eyes; behind his eyelids all was white, as if before a vision. He thought of Thursday night. Then he frowned. Why had Tina been unable to work? He could not recall that she had previously said so. He sorted through the last few days, and, as he drowsed, a pattern seemed to form. Was Tina giving him a chance to ask Shiela out? Could Shiela have herself arranged for him to be alone with her? He had never considered that she might want to go out with him. But as he searched—the way she let him touch her, the way she laughed off Tina's suggestions of a relationship between them, the perfume she wore to the office (surely only for him, for Tina, married, wore none when at work)—each incident yielded evidence. Tomorrow night. He must not let this opportunity pass. They would be alone, and he would ask her casually to meet him Friday night. He slept. The moon still grinned.

The morning chilled him. Last night's resolution seemed as distant as the sun behind the fog, visible when he squinted as a white-hot sixpence dalled by grey breaths. But at work, snag with Shiela while the fumes receded deceptively outside the window, he began again to anticipate the evening. There was no call for Shiela, nor did she touch the phone, this seemed a favorable sign. The day drew on, the fog crept back, unnoticed. It was almost five o'clock. "Make some coffee, Tom," called Shiela, "to keep us awake."

"See you in the morning, children," said Tina, bundled up inside her coat, as she returned to collect her handbag. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She winked at them, then frowned at Mr Tubb, and left.

"Want a sandwich, Shiela?"

"No thanks, got my own."

"Come here a minute." He pulled her down toward him. Surprised, she resisted briefly. "What about old Peeping Tom there," he hissed, "when's *he* going?"

Shiela glanced at Mr Tubb, now caressing his nostrils with a handkerchief

"I thought you knew," she whispered back. "He's not. He'll be on till eight o'clock like us."

"*What?* But you said you'd — you said you'd be alone . . ."

"Well, I would be if I was alone with him! He's looking, I'd better get back." And she abandoned Tom to his thoughts. At first he felt tricked, and hated Shiela; he began to curse her under his breath as his nails scraped on the mesh of the stocking. Then Mr Tubb coughed, recalling Tom; it wasn't Shiela's fault, she'd wanted to be with him, it was that swine Tubb's for staying. Surely he would leave the two of them together before eight o'clock. Tom settled down to wait.

He looked up. It was five to seven. Shiela's head was bent upon her writing; Mr Tubb had disappeared. Tom watched Shiela's long blonde hair, brushed back, shining; out of the corner of his eye he sensed the lurking fog. Now was the time to ask. He would have to speak her name, would he be able to bring out the invitation when she looked up? Unsureness gagged him. But if he did not speak she might glance up and destroy the moment. "Shiela," he called, he tried to catch it, but too late. She met his gaze. He struggled. "I was wondering if you'd—"

"Spare me a minute, Shiela, will you?" Mr Tubb rose from behind his desk, returned triumphant from a search for his Vick inhaler.

"Hang on, Tom." Tom's expression did not change as he watched her cross to Mr Tubb, but out of sight his nails ground into her palms. He glared blindly at his desk. "All right, just as soon as I've finished what I'm doing," Shiela said. Then Mr Tubb called after her. "Oh—if you're making coffee, would you get me a cup?"

My God, no, it's too ludicrous, thought Tom. "What were you saying?" Shiela asked, taking his cup.

The opportunity was past. "I forget," he said.

The first gulp of coffee burned his throat, he gritted his teeth and enjoyed the pain. Then he began to work obsessively, unable to dull his awareness of Shiela as she rustled papers, picked up her drink and after a dainty sip set it down with a clunk, dropped her pen and retrieved it, tripped away to the washroom — When she returned Tom reached for his coffee, found it stagnant, and was able to look up at her. Behind her Mr Tubb was struggling into his overcoat. As he passed them he croaked. "Now, don't get into mischief." This effort proved too much; coughing, he exited beneath the clock, which showed a quarter to eight. The door caught his cough and muffled it.

"Well, if he's going, I'm off," Shiela said. With a lurch of the heart Tom

realized that a quarter of an hour was left to him, which he must grasp. Shiela was stretching and yawning preparatory to getting up. Tom wrenched out the pin from which the stocking dangled and moved behind her, the nylon taut between his hands. "Are you going to strangle me, Tom?" she asked. He held the top of the stocking and fitted it over her forehead.

"Don't, Tom, you'll mess my hair,"

"Come on, put your nightcap on."

"No, you wear it." She stood up, pushing him back, removed the stocking and lifted it over his head. Her arms were high, delicious with perfume, for a second her breasts touched him. His hands hung loosely at his sides. She pulled the stocking down over his eyes.

"You think I'm going to commit a crime or something?" The nylon cramped the bridge of his nose, but he could not take off the stocking, it was Shiela's, she had put it there. Instead, he began to draw it over his face.

"Now you can go out and frighten someone."

"Maybe I will." As she made for the cloakroom she glanced back to see him standing undirected, fingering the edge of the stocking.

She lifted her coat from the hook, her fingers brushed the cloth of Tom's. She waited to hear his footsteps approaching, but there was only silence. She was a little disappointed, for she had had the impression at least twice tonight that Tom was about to kiss her. In fact, just before she had tried to make it easy for him, she felt rather sorry for Tom—she was sure he had no girlfriend—and if he wanted to kiss her, she would let him now and then, while making it clear that she could not go out with him. As a matter of fact, she was rather excited by the idea of such a secret relationship, she and Tom would be secretly united against Tina's morning reports. Where was Tom? Perhaps she could take his arm as they left. She returned to the office, it was empty. She peeked under the desk, Tom might be planning to leap out at her. But he was nowhere to be found. Well, she could play games too, she turned off the light. He would scarcely have gone home without his coat.

But she reached the street without finding Tom. Momentarily, as she imagined him standing silently beyond the edge of the lurid fog beneath the sodium, she shivered. Then the blurred hands of a clock which hung above the alley across the street caught her eye, it was eight o'clock. If she hurried she could catch the early bus. She ran across the road, no car engines threatening the fog, and into the alley.

Her heels clipped on the cobbles. The fog edged in front of her, darkening, drawing back along the walls, passing over drainpipes climbed by rusty barbed wire like vines; then something loomed behind it, blocking at least half the alleyway. Shiela stopped but almost falling, was carried forward, and the shape

resolved into a door and the figure which held it wide open, a figure with a crushed face.

"Tom, what are you doing?"

Without speaking, he indicated the open doorway. The stocking, now pulled down to his chin, dragged his features out of shape. Shiela told herself that Tom was still there beneath the mask. Why should she hesitate? What could there be beyond the door to harm her? The mouth moved; the lower section of the nylon billowed out.

"Don't be frightened," he said, "Shiela."

She stepped forward to the doorway, the fog peered over her shoulder. In the dimness she made out the beginnings of what appeared to be an abandoned storage room, shattered beer-barrels, broken bottles, misshapen lengths of wood and metal against the wall. She entered a few paces, and the door closed behind her.

She froze, her sense of direction had deserted her, and she no longer knew where she might step without falling on glass. Then she heard movement behind her, approaching. "Where are you?" asked Tom.

"I'm here, Tom." Her voice was in front of him. He advanced one foot; it kicked a piece of glass, which tinkled in the silence. If only there were some light! He searched for his matches, then remembered that they were in his overcoat pocket. He lifted his hands and shuffled forward. Her perfume reached him, almost suffocated by a stench of stale alcohol which had been shut in with them. Then his hands found her body.

No! Shiela screamed, her lips pressed tight in horror. This was not what she had meant. She tried to wrench his hands away, but he was already pulling her toward him. She forced her hands up between his arms and reached his face. She expected to encounter the stocking, but he had rolled it up to his forehead. Before she knew what she was doing, she had raked his face.

Pain seared his cheeks like trickles of acid. He backed away toward the wall, and tripped.

Shiela heard something fall, and a crack of glass. She whirled, but no glimmer of light outlined the door. She bit her lip. "Tom, let me out," she called desperately, "or I'll scream." A piece of wood clattered, and again glass cracked. His silence terrified her, she thought she could hear him breathing painfully. Suddenly it occurred to her that he might be injured. "Tom, I'm sorry," she said. Still there came no answer, another plank fell to the floor, and she thought she could glimpse a shape rising to its feet. A final intuition came to her. "Come on, Tom, I won't tell anyone," she called. The movement stopped, so did the breathing. At last feet shuffled toward her, and she heard a tight brushing followed by an elastic snap, as of a garment being pulled off, it was the stocking.

THE SECOND STAIRCASE

DELTA FILMS INTERVIEW MEET EUSTON 9.00— But never having met Mike Parry, Carol bobbed above the crowd and thrust through trajectories as the clock edged on to 9.15, finding Mike finally beneath the clock, hopefully holding aloft as identification a copy of *Castle of Frankenstein*. Mike smiled recognition, then his mouth drooped as the minute hand turned downward.

"I'm awfully sorry, Carol," he said. "Their front office phoned me last night, the interview's off. They'll be shooting exteriors all day. Schedules strike again."

"But I brought my camera and everything," Carol protested, "and I paid for the train and took the day off as soon as I got your telegram!"

"I know, but it isn't my fault after all. When you're doing interviews for *Castle of Frankenstein* I suppose you have to expect this sort of thing. What do you want to do now? Will you catch the midnight train?"

"I don't have to go back till tomorrow, so I'm certainly not going to. But I haven't got a hotel." Carol waited for Mike to offer a room.

"Then we'd better find you one. Listen, Richard Davis has set up a special showing of his horror film tomorrow night if you're interested. George Harrison and Ravi Shankar should be there, and John Campbell may be coming."

"I've got to go back tomorrow!" Carol complained shrilly, thinking of the supervisor at the duplicating firm, shuddering.

"All right then, we'll find you a hotel, and then I suggest a movie."

At Lancaster Gate the grinding lift deposited them before a scanty bus stop queue, its indifferent curiosity unwelcoming as the drained November light.

Mike led Carol past towering girders which sketched some future hotel, into streets of hotels and boarding-houses staked out by bare black trees. In the Underground, among commuters suspended from the ceiling, reading swaying newspapers, Carol had been surprised how easy it was to talk to Mike, to flatten the flickering screen into words, while their correspondence, initiated by Carol on seeing Mike's name signed to a magazine article, had been friendly, Carol had known too many conversations in which the other had soon withdrawn on some pretext. Mike must have been unable to offer a room. He liked Mike.

"Good Lord, where've you left your suitcase?" Mike halted by a lone parked Mini marbled by frost.

"I haven't brought one. I don't need it for one night." Carol slept naked, a proof of virility, he told himself.

"Hmm, some hotels don't like that. That's if we can find one." Glass doors, pillared porches. "Hotel Full." Hostile stations abruptly interrupted by a side street, its corner marked by one Fiat whose owner fought its engine behind the windows, steamy as a bathroom with his breath. "Any port," Mike suggested, indicating a protruding plastic sign halfway down the Victorian line HOTEL DOCHERTY—*Bed and Breakfast*.

"I hope it isn't squalid," Carol commented, following

"*Vacancies*!" Mike rang the bell and peered into the pastel vista fragmented by the frosted glass. "A horror film, of course," said Carol, leafing through *What's On in London*.

"I thought the Bergman at the Academy—never mind, I can see that next week."

"Here's a good one—behind the Charing Cross Road, it says. Oh, I'd love to see this—"

A blonde in a short blue dress and white apron let them into the dull red carpeted hall. "A single room for one night?" Mike enquired, turning to Carol for confirmation.

"One moment please, I will go for the manager," she said, faintly Swedish.

"I'd love to see this—*House of Dr Jekyll*, sounds great."

Mike turned from the visitors' book, which was overshadowed by a vase of dusty plastic flowers. "Sounds vintage," he agreed—or was it irony? Carol wasn't sure. About to argue, Carol heard voices descending the stairs at the end of the hall, two women beneath a stained glass window robbed of brilliance, arm in arm as they aided each other—a statement, an audible breath, a step down. "In the river," one wheezed, her voice faltering with her foot in

space like a senile soundtrack. Mike glanced up, then returned to the vase, Carol watched and listened. "She fell into bad company, I'll wager. That's the trouble with servants. And of course you don't need me to tell you what happened next." A tinny hymn rose from a radio beyond the door through which the girl and manager were conferring hurriedly. The women wavered on the gulf's edge two steps up. "What do they expect, letting foreigners in?" The women rested panting in the hall, then sidled suspiciously past Carol into and out of a passage at right angles to the hall, leading to what must be its twin. "She couldn't even speak English. The manager's wife, if that's what she is and I have my doubts, had to tell her what to cook in French! Isn't that wasteful planning?" "And that sort of girl, if a *man* got hold of her—" The women drew closer together and fumbled the front door closed behind them.

"If he doesn't mind, he can take 3," the manager said and emerged to confront Carol. He was stout, ringed with fat, bloodshot eyes in a face red under sweat. The Swedish girl watched from the doorway. The manager glanced back at her, inflating his rings, and smirking, winked at Carol, the secret sign of the lechers' confraternity. Carol stared at him, he sympathized with the girl, felt she was degraded by the manager's allusion. Men always degraded women, Carol wouldn't if one ever came to him. Rebuffed, the manager told her, "You'll not be moving into B until Mrs Docherty fits it out for you. She's here replacing our French maid," he persisted to Carol, and boisterously continued, "Nasty business, that!" Mike frowned at Carol, Carol waited.

"Can you wait a bit at all? I can give you 3, but it isn't ready yet. An hour or so?" In the unseen office, a clock chimed ten and an announcer declared that it was five to ten. "No, that's fine," said Carol. Thirty shillings—well, the room should be acceptable, judging from the hall, and the Swedish maid was sweet. He scribbled his signature at the foot of the column of dehumanized names and exchanged the notes for keys, keeping aloof from the moist red hand. "I'll find the room tonight," he said. "Top of the stairs," explained the manager. "Top o' the mornin' to you gentlemen."

"God, I hate men like that," said Carol in the street.

"I don't hate anybody," said Mike.

Mike couldn't place the cinema. After a meal at the Wimpy they crossed Leicester Square, the Odeon collapsed with a crash beneath cranes. "Must be up here," said Mike, indicating a street behind the hasty crowd, raindrops jewelling their shoulders. "You sure you wouldn't like to see something more tasteful? What's on with it?"

"*Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*," Carol read phonetically.

"Now that is beautiful. I'm with you for that."

Squeezing between piled barrows, books toppling from one, apples rolling from another, they ignored the beckoning figures beneath *Sex Films* signs, passed a Turkish restaurant and turned up an alley "Sex films," Carol said. "Isn't it degrading?" How much more so than *House of Dr Jekyll*? "Mike retorted, pointing at the half-naked girl in the monster's arms, the hunchback with the whip, the doctor fondling a skull.

The screen was grey and stained, at its side plaster cupids craned their necks to peer within the boxes of the converted theatre. The girl who had taken their tickets now donned an ice-cream tray and faced the auditorium. As Carol stared round at the seats—an old man snoring six rows behind, a scarved student reading *Cahiers du Cinema*—the faces dimmed and were extinguished. The ice-cream girl idled up the aisle. "Go away and let us concentrate," hissed Carol.

"There's no—*people*—left up at the castle," the hero was told by a Transylvanian coachman from Brooklyn. Carol put his feet up, someone snored, someone splintered an ice-cream carton. A hunchbacked retainer hobbled down the hall, avoiding the plywood walls. "Who is the beautiful girl who stared from the window as I entered?" asked the hero. "'Tis my daughter and you'd best not forget it," croaked the hunchback. Carol hated him, he hoped the monster would give him what he deserved. Cripples offended him like the supervisor at the duplicating firm—stamping up the office, pretending to help Carol with his work, putting one arm around his shoulders, ruffling his hair—the sissy swine; Carol thought of him in bed, and shuddered back to the screen. The hunchback was beating his daughter, thunder rolled like bowls. "Leave the girl alone!" shouted the hero, snatching the whip, laying it across the hump, Carol rubbed his hands in glee. Someone felt his way along the shaking row of seats and plumped down in front of Carol. "A whole empty cinema—" Carol complained and waited while Mike moved. He stood his camera between his feet and saw Dr Jekyll stride forth from a secret panel. "Fool!" he snarled to the hunchback. "You and your daughter will ruin my experiment! Get the girl, Karl—" and the coachman carried her struggling against a sheet of lightning. "As for you, sir, perhaps you may have the privilege of donating your brain for my experiment—" and the hunchback struck the hero from behind.

"So the sixties don't have a monopoly on gratuitous nastiness," Mike commented. "Sssh," snarled Carol. Lightning thrust a finger in the vault,

prised it open, the monster shambled forth, bolts protruding from its neck like boils. "The first adequate shot in an hour," said Mike to himself. The coachman was eating sausages in the kitchen; a huge fat man—Carol saw the manager of the Hotel Docherty. The monster peeped in the window. Another sausage went down whole. The monster strode through the panes. The man in front of Carol bobbed up and down, chortling. The film shook, darts and rings of light were sprinkled on it, and a bright thread was stretched across the frame. The hunchback appeared and shouted to distract the monster, the film jerked and his rubber hump bounced about the screen as if by magic. Carol groaned and punched his thigh. The coachman squashed silently and spread across the plaster cupids, then reformed as the projectionist whipped off the Cinemascope lens. The monster advanced—to break the snivelling fat man's back, to tear off his head—but it merely strangled him, Carol deflated. "By the Almighty, sir, what have you wrought?" the hero cried as the monster charged through a cardboard wall and the castle collapsed. Bricks fell on the hunchback and one bounced off his hump; bottles of acid smashed on the doctor, the hero carried the girl into the dawn and looked back once. "He was a good man once, but he wanted power," he intoned.

"I don't see how you enjoy that sort of thing," Mike said in the interval.

"It doesn't hurt anyone," said Carol. "Nothing you can't touch can hurt you."

The opera film about the umbrellas was stupid, Carol thought. A man drove into a garage and sang about his car. Carol thrust his knees up and tipped the ashtray into his lap, he galvanized upright. "Look at my trousers!" he cried, brushing. "Ah, merde!" sang someone on the screen. The student with the scarf laughed ostentatiously. "Look at all this," protested Carol.

"How about watching the movie?" suggested Mike.

"But it's stupid! Who ever heard of people singing everything?"

"My trousers still aren't clean," Carol said.

"I'll drop you a line sometime this week," called Mike as the doors met. The tunnel drew the train into itself and Carol headed for the stairs, past panting late comers. On the escalator heavy-eyed descending girls passed wide-eyed girls in bra and panties, Carol adjusted his camera, eyes averted. Fashion photographers must take a delight in degrading their models. Carol's subjects were landscapes and friends—he'd have liked to have photographed Mike as an aid to memory. His heels clanked on the metal treads of cracked white-tiled staircases; he strode down dusty circular corridors under naked bulbs, swinging the penumbra of a camera. They'd made their way from the

plaster cupids to the Charing Cross Road, a drunk on a doorstep swinging a bottle, a blonde in a mini-skirt rhapsodizing over Beckett, a cluster of umbrellas protruding from a crowd as from a flowerpot outside Better Books, within which Mike and Carol sheltered. "Why, hi!" said Mike, buying a copy of *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*. "These are the editors of *Gothique* and this is Mick Harris of *Twilight*, and this is Carol, my cameraman who wasn't, folks." An old man picked up papers from the platform, studied them, dropped them muttering; Carol stared into the tunnel, where trains thrust and vanished like huge mysterious worms. They'd all wandered round the bookshops, talking films, ending up in the Golden Egg beneath the Royal Dental Hospital as the Leicester Square fountain dulled from molten in the sunset. Carol leafed through Mike's horror-movie magazine, admiring the photographs but unable to understand a word of the French, and Mick Harris said "Don't tell me you side with our friends here on horror for its own sake!" Carol felt the focus of attention turn to him and argued—but he couldn't talk about the supervisor at the duplicating firm, about the hotel manager. Then the play was caught from him, the argument was bounding back and forth across the table, never falling. Carol turned back to the magazine, he felt uneasy in a crowd, threatened by negation. The magazine—Once, reading *Gothique* in the lunch hour, he'd sensed the supervisor's chin almost on his shoulder, heard the soft voice "You could see all these films complete in Paris, if you ever feel like a holiday. If you're short of money . . ." Carol stamped his foot. The old man on the platform snarled something surrealistic and went off in search of unprotected scraps of paper. Mike and the others faded, from the horizonless desert of his life arose the familiar twisted figure, the hotel manager sharp and flat beside him. Carol hadn't lost the supervisor in *House of Dr Jekyll*.

With an approaching drum roll, the train emerged blindly from the tunnel. Carol sat down, placed his camera beside him, brushed at his lap, still stained. At Lancaster Gate he left *What's On in London* on the seat, as the train continued, he glimpsed a man take his place and pick it up. The lit ground streetward and left him before the lone glittering bus stop behind it hung the moon like a stained light bulb. He turned right toward the side street and the Hotel Docherty. Five youths were dawdling toward him, elbowing each other, playing railings with umbrellas. He crossed the street and circled behind them to reach the hotel, swinging his camera. "What's that you've got, darling, a handbag?" called one. Quickly bored with him, they jostled, punching, it to the station.

Carol's face burned, his fists clenched. Who did they think he was, the

supervisor? All these men exaggerating their virility—it made him sick. He glared at each frosted front-door panel. How many rooms tonight in which some poor girl would suffer untold humiliation? Like the little Swedish maid—Perhaps she'd sensed his sympathy that morning; she knew he'd be gentle, respectful. He might meet her on the stairs.

His fingers on the key were frozen; he could barely fumble it into the slot. The radio was dead; the hall was silent. Immobile, a pen hung on a chain from the visitors' book, one link was open, hooked. Carol tiptoed by and upward. The landing window was stained black. On the first floor a line of cold white hostile doors reflected their doubles; no sound suggested that the rooms were occupied. Halfway to the second floor Carol passed a toilet. The Swedish girl was forgotten; he wanted to find his room, his bed, to forget ambitions, failures. On the second landing hung a static chandelier like a giant spider encrusted with ice. Beneath it was a staircase, training a threadbare carpet into darkness. Carol touched the wall, no light-switch. Top of the stairs. He padded into blindness, his elbow collided with a turn. Hot at the thought of awakenings below, he placed each foot with anguished care on the muffling carpet, wary of the fortified silence. His last step round no stair, his groping fingers chilled on a smooth door. They ranged and traced. 3. His fingernails scraped on the lock, the key slipped in and the door opened. A box of midnight luminosity stood before him. He closed the door and switched on the light.

Thirty shillings? Even in London—A rust-red carpet edged by a walnut wardrobe opposite the door, to its left a bed beneath an open window, a straight chair beneath the bed's foot and a washbowl, nothing to relieve the wool waste pitilessly lit by an unshaded bulb reflecting from the pale grainy wallpaper. Maybe he'd complain—but in the morning, he was tired. He tiptoed downstairs to the toilet. The black enamel of the fittings was speckled with whitewash. The hotel was still disquietingly quiet, uninhabited, at least he wouldn't be required to strain for staircase conversation. As he closed out the foreshortened luminous parallelogram at the foot of his stairs, he found that the latch had been held back, he released it. It must have been unlocked when first he entered his room. He crossed to the washbowl. No towel lay across the dark-red scalloped counterpane. Carol unfolded his own, neatly packed into his coat pocket, he would never use towels which others might have touched. One corner yielded his toothbrush, he grinned mechanically at himself, freckled with someone's toothpaste on the mirror. No tumbler—now that was too much. He knelt and caught the jetting water in his mouth, the

plumbing twittering like maching-guns, like the Martian deathrays in *The War of the Worlds*, the fat man backing away, streaming sweat, running, mown down; his lips momentarily closed over the tap. Then he stripped, doused himself with lukewarm water, towelled hurriedly, shivering, refolded his trousers on the chair, brushing at the stain. He thrust at the open window. It resisted. Well, he was man enough to stand it. He turned out the light, padded to the bed and pulled the blankets over his shoulders, enjoying the keen sheets. He drew his knees toward his stomach. His warmth lulled him.

Something soft and heavy moved across his face. He jerked upright into blackness, and his nails clawed at the curtain swaying in a frozen draught above him. The room formed before his eyes. A sheet of moonlight was hung up in the doorframe and stretched along the carpet to the window. Light glimmered in the mirror and painted Carol's jacket on the chair as a pale rectangle like a headstone, the wardrobe was a mass of shadow to his left. Carol became aware that he was trembling with cold, his shoulder blades were aching. He must have slept for several hours. He heaved at the window, his fingers slithered up the frame, beneath he saw parked cars, huddled like animals for warmth. His hands were trembling independent of his stoicism. He'd never sleep like this, he had to compromise. He swung onto the arctic carpet and tottered numbly to the chair. Grabbing his vest, which he could hardly see or feel, he struggled into it. His bare arms thrust from it and it fell about his body. The mirror framed its last quiver. Carol faced himself, he knew something was wrong. The length. Glancing down, he saw that he had not put on his vest at all. It was a girl's slip.

The door opened soundlessly, and the manager came in.

As the closing door flashed in the frame of moonlight, Carol saw that the figure on the wood was not B. Good Lord, I'm awfully sorry, what must you think, he was about to say. But his lips were working silently toward a scream. He was shaking, not with cold but with terror, somehow not his own. Then he knew. The manager came forward from the moonlight into the thick darkness, and as he left the beam he leered. Carol felt the silent shadows close in to hold him helpless. The crimson face moved nearer, slanting in the darkness like a demon. A voice pleaded brokenly with the hot approaching mass, but it could not be Carol's, he did not speak French. His consciousness was flying off in fragments and something alien was rushing in to fill the vacuum. His body changed. He did not dare to look. He lunged desperately for the doorknob. A great shape threw its weight against the door. Carol's fingers clutched the light switch by the mirror. The bulb blazed on an empty

room. The door was locked. Carol's clothes hung on the chair. He closed his eyes as he looked down, then forced them open; he was wearing only a vest. Of the manager, those hands Carol could feel, there was no sign.

The wall turned blinding white, the switch swam forward, glaring silver. It was dawn. The first car sped through an amber shaft between the houses. Carol felt that he had sat on the bed, trembling though fully dressed, for years. At last he leapt up, thrust towel and toothbrush into pockets, dragged the door open and stood waiting. Up the staircase filtered the sound of someone searching radio wavebands. Through Carol's mind flew thoughts: it hadn't happened to him, it wasn't real, it couldn't hurt him any more than could a film—none of them more convincing in the curtained dawn than they had been all night, as he'd sat vainly waiting for the next onslaught. He had to talk to someone. He flinched into the hall, eyes on the office door. No radio—the calm before the shock effect. He backed into the branching corridor, into the parallel hall, up the second staircase to his room at the top—bright geometric wallpaper, towels across the bed, soap and tumbler over the wash bowl—and down again to the telephone which had belatedly registered. But Mike wasn't in.

"How should I know when he'll be back? I'm not his mother!" Mike's landlady clicked and whirled.

Carol held the dead receiver. Women—he hated them, their soft helpless bodies, passively resisting, unattainable—even the little Swedish girl—No, he must think straight. He had to talk to her. She might be next. She could help him rid himself of the manager. He couldn't be alone in the London crowds again, pressed in upon himself, not yet. He descended to the breakfast room.

Faint tunes were strained from wall-speakers, yellow chairs and tables were spaced out across the floor and set with red plastic plates. Carol threw his coat on one chair and sat opposite. Toast was shelved in a plastic rack. Carol scraped butter on a slice, the sound resented by the silence. Then he left it on his plate. Why didn't she come? He could feel the manager filling his body, jerking his reflexes. Suddenly he realized that he faced a cupboard door, the kitchen was behind him. He pushed his chair back. The runners caught on the lino. He heard the kitchen door open, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw the crimson face.

"It's not every morning you'll find me serving." The red hand placed a plate. "It's the Irish they say are superstitious, is it? Not the Swedes, eh?" The face bent toward him. "I'm telling you that girl wouldn't go near our last maid's room last night. Stayed with friends. You'd think nobody ever killed

themselves in Sweden. I'm telling you, I'll have something for her when she gets here. Just because—" The manager caught him and threw him on the bed. "There's my wife calling 'Top o' the mornin' to you!'"

The kitchen door closed. Silence. Finally the faint music returned, somewhere outside Carol. By the time the girl arrived, Carol would be gone. There would be only the manager.

And the voice: "If you're short of money . . ."

CONCUSSION

For some weeks Kirk Morris had been gnawed by the knowledge that he must die. He had tried to feign indifference, then, when he realized that at his death Liverpool, if not the rest of the world, would cease to exist, he had determined to return for one last confrontation of his memories.

That day a few private vehicles were coasting in the streets, he signalled one and heaved his case onto the seat beside him. The new transport must have hit a snag again, calling forth these vehicles in imitation of the bygone taxis. He sped across London. The high concrete-and-metal buildings were mobiles of sunlight which ached in his eyes. Since weather control had cleared the city skies the bleached bone streets had become yet more unreal to Kirk, his journeys through them had the obsessive quality of a flight down the corridors of some surrealist film. Nowhere could he find the overpowering solidity of the black grime-encrusted buildings, surrounding one reassuringly for miles, for which he had moved so long ago to London in an attempt to be convinced by his surroundings of their reality. Instead, he existed, robbed of referent and drained of emotion, on a lower floor of a stark rectangular housing block in the suburbs, occasionally meeting families in the lift or young couples at the meal dispenser round the corner, and it was partly the conviction that he would die unnoticed that had persuaded him to undertake this journey into nostalgia. Of course, he thought, shaking himself awake, this was nonsense, when he died they would cease to be, as much illusion as the GLCPT which had pensioned him off when the buses ceased to run. But if Liverpool was illusion, why did he need to spend time and energy on the illusion of returning?

The vehicle drew up beside the gap in the buildings like slabs of sand

which denoted Victoria Coach Station Kirk handed a note over the driver's shoulder; the man hesitated, looking unsure whether to be grateful for or insulted by the size of the tip—after all, he'd picked up Kirk out of sympathy, not to profit. But Kirk couldn't believe in his indecision; it had been decades since Kirk had trusted anyone. He dragged his case onto the pavement. The passers-by looked shifty, as if smug with a knowledge they thought withheld from him. He'd buttonhole one and worm the truth out of him—then suddenly he giggled: non-existent money to a non-existent driver!

He had to drop the case three times before he reached what had been the coach station; a sheltered square of concrete approached by two lanes between the buildings flecked as tweed which rose toward another square, one of blue sky stained with spilled milk, invisible from beneath the shelter. Queues stamped, swayed and complained on the four platforms closing in the square, and Kirk joined that for Manchester and Liverpool. Preceding him was a young man, glancing frequently at the entrances, waiting for someone or perhaps merely keeping their place. He unbuttoned his 1960-style sports jacket—nostalgia was all the rage these days among the younger set—and cast it over his shoulder, flicking Kirk's face like a challenge. Kirk recoiled grumbling and touched his cheek, feeling wrinkles which could never now be smoothed. He sat down on the concrete bench against the building; the stone was cold as a tomb through his trousers. Across the square a bus snored awake. It caught at Kirk's throat with nostalgia, and after all the presence of the bus could only be related to the nostalgia of Kirk's generation who were sick in other than surface transport and prepared to pay extra for comfort and the sight of a bus still on the ground. It was comfort Kirk sought but the comfort of remembering the day he met Anne.

The young man with the sports-coat turned from the exhaust and coughed, Kirk adjusted his glasses, held together for a year with tape, to focus on each detail of the vehicle, to realize memory. Through the grey fumes a girl, mysteriously glimpsed, was shoving her luggage aboard the rack, and when Kirk woke Anne was struggling with her case above him. He'd fallen asleep before the coach moved out, this girl must have arrived at Victoria after he'd dozed off, to materialize above him now as from a dream. He blinked through the windows a country lane at speed, somewhere near Stratford, a mauve mist of flowers skimmed by "Did I wake you?" she said "I'm ever so sorry" "Not at all," Kirk said, and grimaced inwardly at his swift response, why must he always cap their remarks so finally, never *talk* to them? He stood up, tottering as the driver wrenched the wheel at a curve "Let me help," and he jammed

the case into place "Thanks, you're awfully good," Anne said and smiled into his eyes; he sat down beneath the smile. At last she seated herself and picked up a book.

If only this were real! It had never returned to Kirk so vividly since he had ridden the bus down to London, abandoning Liverpool after all was over. He could feel her body warm on his, her tongue—as he'd felt it while he waited for her during their lost week, when time had seemed annihilated, for a moment Anne might have appeared on the concrete platform and run to greet him. As if to mock him, the young man in the queue leaned out and scanned the grey square for his girl; Kirk closed his eyes and reached back to Anne for consolation. What had come next? The hot coach upholstery—hushed conversation round him, laughter—pages turning—

Anne's reading speed astonished him. The pages passed almost as swiftly as the flowers. The book, too, fascinated him, bound in bright plastic, the corners of its pages rounded off—but his eyes strayed to her bare neck, her sleek piled blonde hair, and framed in the space between the headrests her fresh flowered cotton frock, the creases in its short sleeves flattening and sharpening as she flipped rapidly onward. If he could make her speak to him again—She put up her hand to adjust her glasses, the bus squealed to a stop at a roundabout; the book was torn from her hand. Of course it hadn't been so satisfyingly timed, he'd shifted in his seat as with insomnia, searching for words which eluded him like a dream, but memory had edited, tightening up the cues. He almost fell into the aisle and had the book before she could stoop.

"Oh, aren't you good," praised Anne. He held the book a second after she had taken it, their fingers touched. He'd read about that somewhere.

"Lousy driver," he said, glaring up the coach. Cars chased their tails around the roundabout. "I could do better myself. I mean really—I'm sure I could manage a bus." God, you cretin, he snarled at himself, why should she be interested? But apparently she was.

"Can you drive, then?" she asked as if enthralled.

"I often drive. But I don't have a car."

"Nor do we. I'd love to have one." The driver saw a gap and rammed in the bus; Kirk almost fell. "Don't kill yourself for me," she implored. "Why don't you join me?"

Across the aisle a middle-aged couple nodded to each other like disapproving puppets, but Kirk was too contented to care. "Are you from London, then?" she asked.

"Me? No, I'm from Liverpool. I can tell you're London, of course."

"Actually I'm Southend. Why, you mean the accent? I put that on a lot because it makes me think of flower-sellers and all that sort of thing. You know—all the past. I love the past. Sometimes when I'm going to sleep I think I'll wake up—oh, before I was born, when everything was lovely—well, not everything, there were the wars, but I don't know, the past seems awfully romantic. Sometimes when I woke up and found I was still me I used to cry. When I was younger. But Liverpool has lots of the past still preserved, doesn't it? That's why I'm staying there."

Kirk had been basking in her monologue. Somehow she was the first girl with whom he'd felt at ease since his trauma with Shirley. Liverpool has lots of the past still preserved? He thought of the ossified spire which rose above the roof of Owen Owen's in imitation of the GPO Tower in London, of the boutiques on Bold Street emulating Chelsea, of the garish "Meal in a Moment" hamburger cafes on Lime Street, vanguards from London of a life lived at such speed as to outdistance emotion. "There are pockets of the past round Liverpool, you're right," he told her, remembering lonely walks in Bidston, West Kirby, Frankby. "I've visited most of them. You know, in search of atmosphere."

"Have you honestly? How marvellous!" she cried. "You'll have to be my cicerone!"

This time they both saw Punch and Judy draw together. "This'll never do," she declared, "us sitting together and not even introduced. I'm Anne and I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I'm Kirk," he searched, "and I'm a student. What are you?"

"Kirk, what a lovely name," said Anne, "like an actor. For the cinematograph. Isn't that a wonderful word, cinematograph? Much nicer than—" something which eluded Kirk; but he'd always been shy of asking for words to be repeated, preferring to agree or grant intelligently. "Oh, what am I. A romantic little girl, wouldn't you say? And in term time I'm a student too. My question. In what are you a student?"

"French is my main subject." Memory dashed like water in his face, Adrienne's letter in his pocket, still to be answered. And on the cold stone bench Kirk's fingers clutched the letter, rubbing against the other later letter he wanted still more to forget, tufted both with the fluff of decades. Somewhere in there was her photo, too; head and shoulders, a little askew, a touch of soft-focus by virtue of inexpert lensmanship, lending her long blonde hair a delicate glow and her eyes a hint of moisture above her smile. And never a

photograph of Anne, he tried not to think about that. Adrienne, with whom he'd corresponded for years, promising finally to visit her in Paris if he could collect the money, Adrienne to whom he'd written with a kind of desperate passion after the Shirley incident, calling her "cherie" and "ma petite chou" and all the other words he'd learned outside the French class and believed in because he'd never been to France. Adrienne, and then he thought of Anne's Auntie Ethel: the second time he'd killed. He shrugged them off Anne—what's your subject? He couldn't think of them all the time, he'd go mad. "Anne?"

"But we've been introduced. We know each other. You mean to say you can't guess my subject? History! You knew all along, really." She touched his arm; her skin was warm on his "Here, look at my history book."

She found the plastic cover in her flowered lap. Ahead a car shot from a turning; the coach driver stood on the brake; Kirk was thrown forward as he turned to Anne and his head thudded on the seat in front. Something cracked.

"Oh, your poor head!" cried Anne. "Are you all right, darling?"

Was that what happened? Did she really call him "darling" so soon? Yes, he was sure she did. Perhaps there was more dialogue, but again memory was speeding up the action. Certainly he never saw her book. He sat back stunned, examining his divided spectacles.

"My wounded Kirk!" mourned Anne, then became more serious: "Can't you see very well? Look, let me put them in my bag. This lens has smashed. It didn't go in your eye? Have you any others?"

"No, unfortunately," said Kirk, eyes closed, waiting for the rhythm to weaken. "I can't see a yard without them, either."

"That's terrible. Can't you even see me? I'll be so sad if you can't"

"I can see that far, don't worry," he told her, and at once realized what he'd done. He cursed himself, Shirley had tied his tongue for ever. No doubt Anne didn't think he cared about her now. Perhaps she'd find another cicerone. She might even have been joking, unaware of how his mind had brightened. He strained to speak; too late.

"I think you look handsome without them, anyway," she continued. "But with them you look more studious, so either way is fine. I'll take them to the optician's tomorrow for you. You probably wouldn't be able to find the door! Just think, going into a museum by mistake! They'd probably buy them: unique Victorian eyeglasses, slightly damaged. Glasses can be awfully stupid sometimes, don't you think? I mean when you're kissing sometimes: clink-

clink! The boy I was going out with in Southend said I looked like an owl. We broke it off the other day. He seemed awfully hurt. Still, 'twas but infatuation. How do I get your glasses back to you?"

"You could bring them round." That's not what she means! he moaned at himself. "No, now I think about it, I'd better know how much they're going to cost. Why don't we meet somewhere tomorrow?"

The young man in the coach queue—who might have been strategically placed on stage to represent Kirk's younger self—patrolled the platform for his girl-friend, brushing from his sports-coat dust sneezed away by the exhaust, and Kirk glanced down at his sagging grey suit as he hurried toward the Pier Head. The Liver Clock above him tolled eleven. He'd taken everything he could out of the pockets to give the suit some shape—including Adrienne's letter, now a fortnight old, which he must answer as soon as he had time—but the trousers still bulged shapelessly at the knee, his wallet still outlined a rectangle of grey on his jacket; for too long he'd had nobody for whom to dress. He plunged beneath the shadow of the long Pier Head bus station hall, pale as the bore of a blown bone, about him milled a vague crowd, prams, motorcyclists scented with petrol manoeuvring their machines to the ferry, a hive of shade and color. A smell of hot pastry lured him to the baker's stall. At the adjacent bookstall a figure in white moved away and blurred completely; next second it had run to him and focused. Anne smiled apologetically. "I shouldn't tease you when you can't see," she apologized. "I won't do it again, I promise. I found an optician's near Bidston, such a lovely one, all antique! You must see it sometime. He said your glasses won't be ready for a week, so you won't be able to see me really at all. It's terribly sad."

She was wearing a white sweater, white sharply pleated skirt, white patterned socks. Or was that the next day? It was all so long ago. He clutched the stone bench. Let her be wearing these, he liked them best. "Don't worry, I can see you," he replied, and his toes squirmed. "You look great," he said.

"You're nice. Where shall we go?"

He hadn't thought. "Having fun"—where did you go for that? What could you do in Liverpool on a summer morning? The art gallery, the parks, to which he'd gravitate in London, seemed a little cheerless, the cinemas weren't open—besides, he couldn't see. "Let's walk down and I'll think," he said, and led the way down the ramp to the river, where figures fuzzed against the dazzling water. Anne took his arm. "You don't mind, do you?" "On the contrary," he responded, immediately bitter at his stock response, his inaction. "There's always New Brighton fairground," he said, and swore at himself. You

provincial idiot, that's not the place to take a London girl! —not London, Southend, whose fairground must long ago have earned her contempt. But Anne clutched his arm: "That'd be fabulous, I love fairgrounds, so nostalgic!"

He couldn't see the colored lights above the fairground, he imagined them set in a velvet sky. Blocks of paint whirled and lifted screaming. A few couples sat on warm benches; others sought the shade of the amusement arcade, drawn by the purr of fruit machines and the infrequent rush of coins. Kirk took Anne's hand and settled her in a Ghost Train car. They plunged into darkness; the car jerked back from death grins—Kirk saw only luminous clothed eggs. Anne huddled closer and he put his arm around her, inhaling the scents of talc and laundered wool. Her hair lay light and warm against his cheek.

"But ghosts aren't really like that," she insisted as they came to rest in sunlight. "I think they'd be just like people, and you wouldn't know what they really were until afterward. Those things in there are straight out of a Gothic novel. Mind you, I don't mind Gothic novels. Being carried away by a horseman in a black cloak over the mountains under the moon to a castle' — No, I'm only joking, I'd rather be with you. My turn now." And she pulled him toward a circular platform. The car whirled about, was lifted spinning and suddenly was hurled almost from its axis. The fairground tilted, fell away. Kirk closed his eyes. The sky was swimming, he couldn't move for fear of being thrown clear, though Anne weighed on his arm and sand rubbed between his fingers.

"Wasn't that marvellous?" Anne panted. "Where shall we go next? Oh, poor Kirk, don't you feel well?"

"Not very. Maybe because I haven't got my glasses."

"Oh, dear, and I was going to buy you an ice-cream. Sorry, darling, shouldn't have said that. Come on, I'll get you a drink. It'll do you the world of good."

Reaching the main street, they found themselves opposite the Court Cinema, dwarfed by a poster for taxis, two children ran by with propellers. "What a strange little place," said Anne. "*Vertigo*, what's that? Oh, I'm sorry that wasn't exactly in good taste."

"No it's all right," mumbled Kirk. "*Vertigo*—it's the Alfred Hitchcock film about James Stewart becoming obsessed with Kim Novak, I should say the girl he thinks she is, and in trying to mould her into his dream of her, he causes her death."

"That's awfully sad. I wish we could see it. Come on, I'm going to give you your medicine."

The Scotch settled Kirk's stomach, but not his thoughts, perhaps he should suggest a visit tonight to *Vertigo*, even though it would be invisible to him. He felt ill at ease in the empty parlor, holding hands with Anne, watched by the barman as he polished glasses and flicked flies; he'd rather be showing Anne off to the crowds. Again the move was hers. "Do you think we could go to Ellesmere Port?" she said. "I'd so like to see the docks before they're all demolished."

On the bus to Ellesmere Port she caught his eye. "You like my pleats, don't you? I think you'd like to touch them. But that'd be wicked." So that was what she'd been wearing. She'd said that on the bus that day. He was sure she had.

Their visit to Ellesmere Port had faded, it jerked from image to image like an old film. The stern of a ship behind high stern grey buildings, the grey seeping into the sky; Anne waving to someone at the ship's rail. "Now, I'm only teasing," she told Kirk as he tensed. "Let's go back to my auntie's. You do know how to get to Bidston from here?" Unfortunately, Kirk couldn't correlate the bus-routes this side of the Mersey; he suggested they walk for a while. Along the road they reached a gate into a field. "Look, marvellous, a bridle-path," cried Anne. Kirk thought it more likely the path of tractor-treads, but let himself be led. Then the grey sky darkened and pattered on the grass; they piled beneath the shelter of a tree. Kirk's arm was round Anne's shoulders, she was silent, regaining her breath. He felt the bark rough against his back, he stared across the field, trying to forget that the next move was his, but the dull green was curtained by indolent raindrops against a faster distant mist, and he sensed rather than saw that the indistinct horizon was blocked off by the squat curves of an oil refinery. As if of its own accord, his hand edged round and stroked Anne's soft warm cheek. The rain slowed. "We'd better go before it starts again," Anne said. "I like it here," Kirk protested weakly. He'd tried and failed, he knew. "I know, darling," and she smiled up at him, "but it'd be nicer at home."

"Auntie Ethel, come and meet Kirk." They stood in a hall bright as an aquarium, Kirk was aware of surfaces of glass and plastic, the open treads of a staircase, what seemed to his limited vision like indirect lighting. A door opened at the end of the hall, a figure in slacks moved toward them, graceful yet shy as a tropical fish, halted and said in a voice a little cracked by age.

"He's gorgeous, You'd better watch out or I'll have him for myself. Hello, Kirk, can you see me from there? Then I'd better warn you that you may get a shock." The face swam forward; the projectionist focused, and Kirk saw that beneath the grey hair and eyes, one side of Auntie Ethel's lined yet lively face was covered by a purple birthmark. "Now why on earth should I get a shock?" he asked, shaking hands. "Unless you mean because you're nicer-looking than your niece." Anne kicked his ankle, but not hard. "There you are, men are fickle," said Auntie Ethel. "Sorry if I embarrassed you, Kirk. I go like that sometimes. Ever since someone—well, I won't bore you. It's odd, you remind me of him. I know your face, I'm sure. It's all right, Anne, I'm not trying a line." She seemed to recollect herself. "Now you children go and get dry and I'll make you something to eat. You're not going to help, Anne, you're too wet. It's been a long time since I've got dinner for more than one."

"It *is* sad, Kirk," Anne said, taking his coat and leading him into the sitting-room. "Auntie Ethel's husband was killed in a car crash before they'd had children, and I know she so wanted children. She was ever so worried about my coming down by bus, in case—you know. Well, we'll be her children all this week, won't we?"

Kirk, trying to settle himself on an odd curved couch made of cane, agreed, but his thoughts were elsewhere. How long before he had to kiss Anne? The aquarium seemed timeless, unreal, he couldn't ponder properly. "I'll help her set the table, anyway," Anne said, and leaned down to kiss his cheek. He remembered *Brighton Rock*, more strongly than when he'd been with Shirley, Pinkie kissing a girl and missing her mouth—he couldn't see that Graham Greene had been at his shoulder, whispering doubts. He thrust his fingers through Anne's hair and pulled her down to him, kissed her mouth, which was scented and moist. Then he let go, waiting. "Gosh, you're strong," Anne said, "but let's eat first, darling."

"This is a marvellous house," Anne told Auntie Ethel. Though the latter had protested, Anne had insisted on sitting with her to keep her company, leaving Kirk facing them as at an interview. "All these lovely things," and she looked to Kirk for confirmation, but he was still adjusting to the plates and table-cloth, both made of paper. The latest trend, he supposed, and realized that Anne was deliberately suppressing her love of the antique.

"I've only been here once before, you know," she told Kirk, who was struggling to saw his lettuce with a plastic knife. "I haven't even been to Bidston Village."

"No, so you haven't. You'll have to escort her there, Kirk."

"I certainly will." His knife slipped and tomato-seeds glittered on the paper cloth like colored tears. "Don't be so tidy," Auntie Ethel rebuked as he tried to scoop them up, "you'll show up the rest of us. Plenty more cloths where that came from."

"I stayed with Auntie Ethel just for a day last year. They drove me down from Manchester because they couldn't put me up there. Manchester's too modern, anyway. I was asleep in the back all the way here. I wished I hadn't been, I like night driving—" She stopped. "I was in Manchester for a wedding."

"They say one wedding leads to another," said Auntie Ethel, smiling.

The sitting-room again, Anne lifted the lid of a red record-player. "I'd like to dance with you." "I can't," said Kirk. "Never mind, darling," and she put her arms round his neck. Her perfume was as subtle as her outline in the evening. There was a brief struggle; he tried to pull her aboard his knee, she was lifting him. "Wait a minute," she said, and pulled away. She collected cushions from the furniture and arranged them expertly on the floor. "Lie down," she told him, and as he did so. "Darling, take my glasses off." He wished she wouldn't direct so much, it was like a rehearsal. Then she knelt above him, stroked his hair, brushed her lips down from his forehead to his mouth. He drew her down to him. He was filled with a timeless peace, so much for Shirley and for Graham Greene! When he felt her tongue he was suddenly dismayed, but tenderness passed through the slow luxurious movement of her mouth and gradually formed into his caresses, tenderness which drifted through them and became the dusk which merged their bodies, their warmth like a cocoon, until the coach roared round the concrete courtyard and out into the world.

Kirk blinked weakly, the dust lay on his lips like tasteless salt. Why must the future drain his last days of Anne? The Liverpool queue had lengthened, but the young man with the sports-coat still turned at each new footstep. Sadly Kirk closed his eyes, but Anne had gone. Some link was needed. Kirk touched his pockets, his trousers full of change, he jangled the money.

Next day the sun was a golden coin, the last few patches of rain were dwindling, like continents eroded by time. Kirk waited outside Woolworth's on Church Street, for some reason Anne had suggested they meet there. Bobs of flesh rushed headlong past, hot cloth waited at the crossing. For a moment he wanted to cut this scene, it was too full of a lost future. But then he gave the cue, to skip it would be to lose part of Anne. Coins. As the doors of

Woolworth's were unbothered to give vent to the chatter of a married couple like the musings of a vast computer, Ann was at his side. "I'm ever so sorry I'm late, darling. You can slap me if you like," and when he laughed, "No, not my darling!" She pulled him into the store and across to the jeweller's counter. A lesser mathematician was still counting, a coin ring for each digit. "Please buy me a ring," she pleaded, "just a little one."

"Which one do you like?" He was playing for time, but he did a coin chosen. God, which hand? He had never before had occasion to look. He couldn't close his eyes, he closed his mind. The coins were even, but which? Which finger? The overalled assistant's eyes were on them, no doubt in her mind she was already describing the scene to her colleagues. "Want some help, luv?" she called. Kirk slid the ring down the coin finger, turned Anne's third. "I don't think so," he replied, and led Anne away the day with an obscure sense of victory. "Is this a holiday engagement?" he could not help asking.

"That's up to you, Kirk, isn't it?" For a moment her eyes were as clear as her glasses. She caught sight of the photo booth near the back next to the door. "I've never seen one of those before," she said, but her voice was saying "Let's, Kirk."

"There we are, together for ever." She examined each other as they turned their ring head toward the camera. "Let's have a picture. Let's have a picture of each other." And she tore off two for Kirk like an expert, cutting them across the cutting shots which made nonsense of the climax.

He took her to Biston Hill. The grass was damp as rain. They ascended the proud white windmill on the Hill, to Kirk's regret, with a view of some. They progressed through the mushy grass to the creek path, down the slope, where Anne said "The pot must have been used sometimes." Kirk knew why but couldn't act, he wasn't sure of it. They passed the first stone house at the bottom of the Hill, as tall as the great cottages as a Moorish painting. "It only," Anne said, "I could go back into the pot." She wasn't speaking to him, he knew, her head was hanging down. He stowed the Biston Village stone walls, old grey houses, a little shop, a little post box, the church porch, the occasional car rolling by, a sheeping "It's been followed up by a council estate any day now," he told her. "Poor village," she said, but it wasn't there for her. "Anne darling," he said, the last time. She asked him her eyes. "If we go up to Caldy Village we can have tea on the lawn. It would like to." "Oh, darling," she told the countryside, "you made me do it for me!"

He led her through the woods to Caldry Hill, clusters of leaves hung aloft like clouds. From the rocks, carved with initials which perhaps had survived their authors, she took in the sunset, Kirk visualized Hilbre Island far below in the Dee, holding its place in the waters, if it were not Hilbre which forged forward through a static medium. At last they returned to the bench to join a presumed series of lovers before sunsets. If only he could tell her why he'd brought her here—to exercise Shirley, Shirley, the student from his course who'd come with him one evening to Caldry, the only haunt of his which freed him to enter the glittering water, the distant trees on the edge of the universe. He'd cast his gaze into the feathers of color laid along the horizon for minutes before he'd slid one arm round Shirley's shoulders and leaned across to kiss her. For a moment she had stared at him, then she'd burst out laughing. No, he couldn't tell Anne, she might resent this substitution, besides, he didn't feel ready to trust such a secret to her. He covered her face, her eyes closed.

Among the trees the shadows shape the passing of a breeze. "Sometimes I wonder where you go when you dream," said Anne. "Do I go into the past, do you think? Just now I feel I'm in a dream. A lovely dream."

"Yes, I know."

Anne watched her feet flicker through the bars of shadow like a film about to stop. "I wish you knew what to say to girls," she said.

A colossal green leper stood on the horizon—the Liver Clock, flaking off each second from the future. Kirk paced the bare wood of the Woodside landing stage and peered at the lagoon lights floating with the current. He *did* know what to say to girls, it was simply that he couldn't often verbalize, he sought peace, not to strain for words. What about his letters to Adrienne? But of course writing in French was different, to declare love in a language other than your own was like placing it in quotes—you weren't emotionally committed. Adrienne. No, Anne, he loved Anne, was he still flinching from Shirley's laughter? But his hand was groping in his pocket for Adrienne's letter, if he must exercise her too before he could reach Anne, then he would. Hurriedly he stuffed back the other letter with the note attached and placed the envelope on the stone bench, perhaps hoping that it would blow away. "My dearest Kirk—I was so glad to hear that you intend to come to Paris. I hope you will be able to— — — the money (decades of pockets later) that word "gather," if he recalled correctly). If you could find a job here—" No, that was enough, he settled himself on the stone bench, finding new areas of cold, fighting cramp. Time might have frozen on this concrete square like a

film; no direct sunlight told the time of day. Victoria Station— No, that took him back before Anne—or afterward. The light behind his memories went out. Anne had gone. He could remember his love for Anne, like a film he'd once seen. "I love you, Anne," he whispered to the dust. And jerked out of sequence, their last scene lit up in his memory.

A pub on the approach to the Pier Head, lights like inverted hanging wineglasses, maritime prints of outward bound ships; from one table a rush of laughter; Anne sitting chin on hand, sipping a vodka. "What will you do eventually, Kirk?" That could mean anything, he chose one meaning "I hope I'll make London sometime in the future," he said, Paris forgotten, after all, he mightn't be equipped to earn a living there, and he'd never even met Adrienne. "I hope you do," Anne said. "And please come and see me in Southend. You remember how to reach me? But until you do, you will write to me, won't you?"

"Of course I will. Do you mind them typed? I type faster than I can write."

"Oh, don't. I want them in your writing."

"All right." The bell for closing time pealed between them. Kirk helped her don the jacket of the suit she'd worn for him, he didn't look down at his own. They left without speaking, struggling through the maze of tables from which a girl collected glasses of soap-suds. The night was chill, a drunk yelled after them and gesticulated, almost overbalancing. As they waited at the traffic-lights on the last stretch to the Pier Head, Anne gripped Kirk's arm. They stepped on the disused railway track between the cobbles and Anne turned. "Kirk, I love you. Please—" He knew what she was forbidden to say, he was on the edge of acting out so many movies that he'd seen. The lights blazed down into his face. "Je t'adore," he said. It was the best he could do, he didn't know whether it was enough, he felt the light fading. But at once she looked up at the clock; he couldn't be sure if she'd even heard.

They had crossed the river, it rushed by unobstructed. As they climbed the Woodside ramp, past a newspaper flattened on the grey wall like a poster, Anne said "I can't pay for a taxi and I suppose you can't either Kirk." "I can't," he told her, he didn't like to add that she had cleaned him out. "Oh, Kirk, five minutes to my last bus," she mourned. They kissed feverishly in the bus shelter, then on the platform, beneath averted eyes, then the engine snarled. Anne moved up the aisle, Kirk's hand clung limply to the pole. Suddenly she cried his name and running back, pressed something into his hand. "My darling, your glasses, I almost forgot!" The bell rang. The bus pulled out. Anne waved as she was drawn away, blurred, was gone. A light

was carried off into the night. He couldn't see. He struggled with the case, opened it, fumbled on his glasses, but the bus had turned a corner, the street was dark, cold, empty.

His glasses brought the pavement closer, sharp as the sights of a delirium—but why go on? If only that was how it had ended!—on one last luminous image which he gave himself of a tiny Anne borne waving away around the corner. The pain of parting was more bearable than the dull ache of disillusionment, which itself was preferable to the all embracing horror of disorientation. But his memories were headlong in their flight from happiness, already they'd rushed through the Liverpool coach station at Edge Lane, bypassing a tableau of a man with a hose and the grey trails of buses like snail tracks, and had dumped him on the coach to Southend, his first visit to Anne Penniless, he'd sold his typewriter; the girls in the downstairs flat on Smithdown Road had complained of its nocturnal tapping—not that he cared, but Anne had said she wanted him to write. And allowing for the remainder of the month he'd still realized enough to pay his fare to Southend. He'd written to Anne two days ago to herald his arrival, but she hadn't replied yet. The letter from Adrienne lay in his flat unanswered. But he knew how to reach Anne, and next week he'd be back to class and Shirley.

The doubts commenced on the edge of Southend, as in a film, he glanced up and gazed out across the first laps of sand. *Had* it been a holiday romance? Had she called him "darling" in the casual London way? Had she declared her love to intensify their parting, to create a scene for her album? He wished he'd waited for a reply to his letter. If she were eager to show him the door, if there were someone else sitting in the front room waiting for him to leave, it would annihilate him. Trivial, trivial, his future self scoffed on the bench, but doubt now was all he could trust. He willed it to dissipate like morning mist over Southend—the amazingly protracted pier, thrusting entertainment seaward to hold steady on the water, faceted yet featureless as time, the sea unfolding sibilantly on the sand, the flowers bordering the streets, the street names elevated on poles like varieties of flowers. Flowers for love or for a wedding. A wedding night on Mount Pleasant, street of Liverpool's hotels and "of all the Mr and Mrs Smiths of the world," as he'd told Anne. Having wavered and chosen a hotel, they found the desk clerk suspicious, but Anne in her white skirt looked too innocent to be guilty. The desk-clerk smiled, perhaps at some remembered escapade, and unlocked the double room. As soon as the door had closed Kirk stroked Anne's hair, found the fastening of her dress, opened it and led her to the bed. Gently he pushed her back and lifted her legs onto the

coverlet. As he began to draw her dress down from her shoulders he realized she was trembling. He glanced at her face. She was shaking with laughter.

A girl laughed in the dry square, Kirk awoke. He kept his eyes closed, he was afraid to open them on tears. "Don't be long for heaven's sake, the bus must be due," said the young man in the coach queue. High heels clicked away. How could he have dreamed that of Anne? Of course they'd never been to a hotel; he'd never seen a girl naked; but if it had been Anne, she'd never have done that to him. She couldn't do that to me, he told himself, passing an old man wheeling his wife along Southend promenade. And he turned up the side street leading to Arlen Street, where Anne lived.

Down the blazing street came two figures, arms about each other. Even with his glasses and in the piercing sunlight, he could not make out their faces. Kirk's fist clenched in his pocket. They came closer, a young bearded man strolling with a girl Kirk had never seen before. His fist opened, already feeling Anne's fingers between his, and he ran to the end of the street, to Arlen Street, and was confronted by a desert of waste ground.

That image was clearest of all: the humps of spewed earth, the ruts and folds of bulldozer treads like the gums of a toothless mouth, a dog urinating brightly in the sunlight against the notice-board which claimed the wasteland, the abandonment, the disorientation. Kirk moaned. He must have been mistaken. He stumbled back toward the promenade and overtook the couple; he put his hand on the girl's warm shoulder to make them turn and to feel a human body. "I'm wrong for Arlen Street, aren't I?" he pleaded. "Can you put me right?"

"Allen Street you want, mate," suggested the girl's escort.

"No, *A-r-l-e-n*," Kirk spelled desperately, hearing Anne say "Like Michael Arlen, you know."

"Wrong town, I'd say," the girl broke in. "You're not from round here, are you?"

"Are *you* from round here?" Kirk caught at the possibility.

"I'm half a mile up the front, mate, and Anne's in the next street." Kirk's stomach twisted; then he saw that the other was referring to the girl on his arm. Kirk moved away, almost fleeing, sand stung his cheeks. As he reached the promenade they called behind him. "There's a map up the prom if you don't believe us."

Of course no Arlen Street was noted on the map. Chaos churned in Kirk like the breeze blown sand. He shuffled toward a group of shops; beside one a staircase led beneath a dead electric sign to a basement coffee bar. He took one

step toward it; Anne might be there—then a pang shot up from his stomach, blocking his way. He no longer wanted to meet her. He wanted to go home. He made for the bus-station, past inverted chairs defending cafe tables, signs on stalls "Novelty Hats", "Torture Thro' the Ages"; the illuminations hung lifeless in sunlight, and "The Longest PIER in the World" had been drained of all but a pink tinge. The next bus was for London, but anything to escape Southend.

The sight of Victoria Station as it had once been, movie posters vast against the sky, actresses of cardboard, drivers sipping coffee from paper cups beside a photo booth (of course, thought future Kirk, he should have known then) was superimposed over the sounds of the concrete square, like a film whose dubbing emphasizes its unreality; on the stone bench Kirk felt the world receding, revealing itself as his hallucination. If he opened his eyes he might find figures mouthing like fish, their dialogue continuing unsynchronized—while in his memory, more vivid, more intense and more convincing, he found he had three hours to wait for the Liverpool coach. He lost himself in the night. Presently, the lights of a cinema blazed, the film was *Vertigo*. No, it was too cruel. But he refused to tire himself for three hours in pursuit of a memory when he could be grappling with it. The film had started, the camera moved alluringly through the shadows of a night-club, and suddenly, bright in a blonde aura, there was Kim Novak. Kirk watched wide eyed, then he shook and buried his face in his hands. Inexorably the film continued. A giant kiss filled the screen—flaps of skin engulfing each other like the jaws of cannibal snails, thought Kirk, still shaking. Beneath the kiss the audience rustled and coughed, neither was real. Abruptly Kirk stood up. Above him in the circle a couple took the cue; as they stood, silhouetted on the fan of light which was Kim Novak, they kissed luminously. Kirk spun about, rammed into a vacated seat and stumbled blindly out.

At Victoria Station a man staggered into the bar, stuttering that life was a bad joke played on humanity, and Kirk directed him out with such force that even this man's fervor failed. Kirk found a stained table, its plastic top decorated with linked brown rings like a Chinese puzzle, arranged his plate of sandwiches and glass of Coca Cola and threw his coat on the next chair. Before his slumped coat stood a half-empty glass, stained with drink like dismal clouds. A waitress somnolently sponged the tables, shoveling the debris onto a single plate as if to feed a dog, she saw the half drained glass and left it for Kirk's girl friend, whose place he must be keeping with his coat. Oh God, he said, realizing. He wondered what he'd do until the coach arrived, sit

and stare at the bare bar, people the seat beside him and weep if necessary; another drunk, they'd think.

The coach seemed stalled for ever, the air conditioning insinuated a faint nauseating whine into Kirk's ears. Muted conversations hemmed him in as at a sick-bed. Just before he leapt up and screamed, the coach pulled out. He couldn't sleep, Anne was there. He stared out with burning eyes at cardboard houses exhibited beneath sodium lighting, then at last the first unlit road where the headlights wiped darkness from vignettes of lonely mansions, caught scurrying small forms and brushed over mysteriously empty cars in laybys, and suddenly he remembered—he could question Anne's Auntie Ethel and discover Anne's address!—if Anne hadn't warned her in advance. He gripped the stone bench to absorb its chill and be weighed down by what reality was left, but already he was flying helpless through the Pier Head on the Sunday afternoon, past old women screaming at old women screaming the Gospel, youths jeering as they aimed from the roof of the police station, unwashed waiting children dragged along by unwashed parents, over the worn boards littered with cigarette-packets and knot-holes surrounded by arrested ripples, onto the bus to Bidston, where the "No Spitting" sign had received the obvious amendment, and out into the sun, for a moment the leaf-shadows which strayed about the pavement were the dapplings of light on the Dee beneath Caldy Hill. He strode toward the house, but his steps faltered. The memorable cry of the gate's hinges was silent, the empty socket of the bell push was somehow filled by a new screw. The door opened.

A girl of Kirk's age smiled and turned her head shyly, she was not Anne. "Could I speak to Mrs Ethel . . . ?" More than that he didn't know.

"I'm an Ethel but I'm not married yet! Who told you I was?" She wavered so near the edge of shrillness that she must be compensating, she looked directly at him, and he saw why. One side of her face was covered by a purple birth mark.

He caught at the burning wood of the door frame and managed not to fall, he clutched the concrete bench and fell, knowing what was to come. His mouth opened and forced deeper into chaos, like a kiss. "You don't have relations—in Southend?"

"Why yes, my sister's there."

"Married with a daughter?" The door-frame flaked beneath his fingers like a block of salt, the grit of the concrete bench coated his hands—he was merging into it, a memorial to chaos.

"Good Lord no, not yet! She's younger than I am, she's staying with our

friends down there. Though I do hope she will be married one day. Me too, if it comes to that. Did you meet her on holiday? I think she's got her eye on our friends' son. She didn't tell you about me, did she? You must come in and have a cup of tea."

"I have to go. It's the wrong address," Kirk faltered and almost ran from the garden. On the pavement he looked back. She was staring at him sadly. He closed his eyes and stepped into the road. She must think he'd fled the birthmark, but there was nothing he could say. A car swept by on each side of him, and he remembered thus she would lose her husband. He beat at the wake of the car and staggered gasping to the pavement. What could he say? She'd think he was insane. At last, from the shadow of the trees, he glanced back. The door was closed.

The bus back to Woodside felt more solid now than when he'd caught it, perhaps draining its solidity from the concrete bench, in which like everything, he'd once again ceased to believe. As he was carried from Besson to his flat he began to suspect how all was staged for him. That night he prowled, even though term began next day, until the night rain lashed him back, he stared at laughing girls on motor cycles borne by a V-shaped spray, he stared into the black hypnotic mirrors of the flagstones, seeking Anne, who was nowhere. He couldn't understand, he was no scientist or mystic, the knowledge that Anne had never been filled him with a doubt of everything he'd taken for granted. At last he sank into bed and was whirled into sleep, dreaming of Anne so vividly that her smile, her voice, her scent, her warmth were more real than the jagged alarm, the slits of light in his room and the hall, and the two letters on the hall table.

One he knew—his only letter to Anne. A blanked god ("No Sign Address", "Gone Away") had encroached on his careful writing and he'd seen someone had scribbled "Arlen Street not built yet." No, it was impossible. He hadn't been with Anne for a week, where had he been? Had he wandered round Liverpool arm in arm with a rat, talking to himself? Then he'd seen, without his glasses he couldn't have known if the crows had eaten him from him and branded him insane. But no, this betrayed Anne. He'd not seen her felt her tongue, her body, no ghost could be so solid. Or a her body, but never illusion—He didn't want to think, he rushed upstairs, the letters in his hand, and wrested open the wardrobe door. The door was closed, the wardrobe was still solid. He found the shirt into whose pocket he'd put the photographs Anne had given him. The pocket was empty. As he found the

nylon folds a hint of Anne's perfume seemed to touch the air. He lifted the shirt and inhaled, no perfume, only a trace of his own sweat. He slumped on the bed. Before him lay the ruthless grid. His hand crept toward it. No, don't! he cried on the concrete bench. But already he'd torn the letter to shreds, and on the bench his hand went limp in his pocket, its fingers slackly touching the other letter, Adrienne's.

On the bed he opened the letter; the writing on the envelope was not Adrienne's, but the postmark he knew. Inside was a folded note in French and another envelope, addressed to him by Adrienne. He didn't feel equal to the French; he wrenched open the second envelope. "My dearest Kirk—you have not yet written, and I have been thinking, I would not want you to come to Paris without knowing all about me. I should have said before. I cannot get about so well, that is what I want to say. You have seen my photograph and I hope you like it, but maybe you did not guess that I have to use a wheel chair." Trembling, Kirk laid the letter on the tangled sheet and unfolded the note. It was from Adrienne's father: she had been rushing to post this letter to Kirk, the road had been busy, and when the wheelchair had overturned, the car had been unable to brake—

On the bench he stuffed the letter back into his pocket, certain once more that all was illusion. Everything was too pat. Adrienne's death was the ending of a movie, Auntie Ethel was the stock sympathizer with romance, Anne was his true love—it was all too scripted for words, he thought, not realizing that only life dares stage such coincidences. When he left the flat as if stepping from one dream to another, he was overwhelmed by unreality: twigs intricately depicted on the sky; a milk van rounding the corner on cue, a train drawing its whistle along the skyline—you couldn't tell him all that wasn't staged to impress him. By his own mind, of course—a brilliant hallucination. No wonder he felt sick on the bus to college, his body was fighting to correlate the illusion of movement with the conviction of stasis, as in a Cinerama film. The college corridors were prolonged into the impossible perspectives of a surrealist painting. In the classroom, between the black speckled plane of the blackboard and the canted dim reflection of the chatting groups, he was amazed by the talent that had contrived the improvised conversations: six separate improvisations, all for him. Then Shirley entered through the doorway, left. He beckoned her over, anxious to know what lines she'd been given. As she approached he lost control; he burst out laughing. "How very intriguing," she said, turning away, she shouldn't have said that, he'd have liked his moment of triumph. When the lecture began—

No, that was enough. There was no need to recall how absurd he'd found the idea of being taught by an hallucination, how he'd fled Liverpool and the ghost of Anne in every street, taken refuge in London where at least he'd never seen her—for he could only fall through his memories of her into a void; if she had not been real, how could he trust any evidence presented by his senses? Yet he was troubled to recall that he'd had the illusion of starving in London until he'd taken a job on the buses, a choice whose source he couldn't determine. Sometimes he felt that he'd dreamed Anne, and sometimes, on the rim of the void, that she'd dreamed him. If so, she'd abandoned him to decades swept bare as by a night wind, walks through streets where light existed only to carve shadows, glimpses of couples, always young, meeting outside cinemas which he would never enter. By now the void was visible through her, soon she would tatter and fade like mist, and the void would close in. He was dying.

"I'm ever so sorry I was so late," Anne said. "You know I don't like travelling in London. I just had to wait for one of those lovely taxis."

Kirk's eyelids trembled. The young man with the sports-coat was no longer alone; Anne was with him, swinging one leg and clapping her hands as the Liverpool coach entered the square. She wore her cotton frock, each flower as Kirk remembered it; it was like emerging from darkness into sunlight. For a moment he thought he'd gone mad. "I'll be leaving before you know," Anne told the young man, "it's ever so sad." And instantly the continuity clarified. The young man's hand covered a flower. For a second Kirk was ready to fight him for Anne. But he knew he was powerless. They had yet to meet.

The coach dozed to a halt and the queue shuffled forward. Kirk stood up and almost fell, his stone legs had disintegrated. He dragged his case through the concrete dust. Anne's escort lifted her luggage onto the rack as she seated herself behind the driver. An old couple sat in the seat behind Anne, Kirk knew he must sit there. He groaned, his toes scrabbled like imprisoned insects. The old couple conferred over the view across the aisle and moved to the seat opposite. Kirk plunged into the place they had vacated. He struggled with his case, and a hand took the handle from him. "Allow me," said the young man. Anne smiled and waited until the case was safe. Crushed, Kirk sank into his place.

The driver slammed his gate. From the front seat came an outburst of confused and hurried leave-taking, silenced by a kiss. Kirk closed his eyes. When he opened them at the first jerk of the bus, he met Anne's gaze. But it was merely passing over him as she craned to wave to the young man. She

hadn't recognized Kirk; she couldn't. The bus rushed through the pale planed streets and Anne regarded herself in a pocket mirror. Had her ghost cast a reflection? He would never know. It was unimportant; here she was before him in the flesh; he had only to lean forward and speak, the one thing he couldn't do. Though he knew her love she had never met him; she was a stranger. And he no longer trusted strangers.

Half an-hour later, in a landscape of lopped trees grey as the pedestals of monuments, he leaned forward. One of Anne's fingers followed the curved corner of her book, lifting to turn; the golden sunlight down on her forearm was warm as her arm in his. His hand lost its grip between the headrests, his lips collapsed together as he fell back, aching. His breath proved the window. Something should happen to bring them together, but he knew nothing would; she wouldn't drop the book, this time it was up to him to plunge into the past, to reinstate reality. "Excuse me—" he cried, thrust forward by the brake. Anne's face appeared in the gap, her eyes were wide, she smiled encouragement. Perhaps she saw him as a cache of memories, of the past she loved. His mouth worked. "Do you—do you know where we are?" he stammered. "I think we're in Stratford," she said, and returned to her book as he muttered thanks. Oh, God, he thought, she was close enough to touch and yet he'd lost her for ever.

Metal glinted in the sky, a steel curve formed on the horizon and passed above them with a sigh. The streets of the new Stratford were lifeless—slabs of concrete left to whiten in the sun, the silver panels of the meal dispensers flashed cold as scalpels as they passed. A love song ebbed from a portable tv, an athlete padded alongside the coach for a few seconds before falling back. For Kirk he, at least, had not been robbed by time of familiarity. It was time which had thrust between them, wearing out his body, setting Anne before him like a fragile perfect doll. Yet for a week they had wandered outside time. If only he could release them once more—

Then he thought he knew. Firm as it had felt, it had not been Anne's body he had held to him, it had been their spirits, essences—he couldn't find the right expression—which had met, somewhere outside time. Their bodies were the clocks which marked the end of their love. Destroy their bodies and they would be reunited. But could he take the final step? He answered himself: what other step could he take? He stood up tottering behind Anne, each limit of him was trembling as if ready to release him. Ahead green grassy banks streamed toward him and were gone, like time, beyond the grey stumps started into sight. "Anne," he whispered. She glanced up from her book,

puzzled. He clutched the head-rest; if only he could touch her, just her hair! "Anne, I know you don't know me—" Her mouth opened. He stammered out: "We met fifty years ago! You went back into the past somehow and we met on a coach, maybe it was here—your case was falling off the rack and I helped you—I love you, Anne!" It's no use, he thought. Her eyes widened; her pink parted lips moved—and Kirk stumbled forward, drove his elbow into the driver's face and wrenched the wheel hard over.

When they'd asked the last question Anne lay back and tried to sleep. She hated the hospital ward, the glass panels round each bed as if to enclose a vacuum, the curtains which drew together at the touch of a button, the beds which could turn traitor and convert into stretchers within a minute; she hoped she would dream of the past. The doctor had disliked her being questioned, but she'd insisted on the facts. They told her of the man who'd caused the crash by attacking the driver, killing himself and concussing the driver and several passengers, including Anne. They said he had spoken to her, but she didn't remember, one never remembers the events before concussion. They showed her a photograph of the old man, but she'd never seen him; so they left her to rest. And yet—Somehow, as she drifted, she felt she'd met him, somehow she referred this to the week she'd lost under concussion. Poor old man, she thought, he must have been miserable to do what he did; mad with his memories, perhaps, now all destroyed. She hoped his last thoughts had been of something beautiful. And quietly, as she hovered on the edge of dream, she began to weep.

THE ENCHANTED FRUIT

When Derek returned with the pâté for Janice the flat was full of Stravinsky, she was marching about to *Jeu de Cartes*, familiarising herself with the rooms: the kitchen shining silver in the sunlight, the bathroom where a Picasso thrice eyed the taps, the living room with bookcase, record player and prints, the bedroom. She crossed to the bookcase as he entered, and from between *God is a New Language* and *Pop Art* withdrew a Carrer cookbook. "Do you cook from this, honestly?" she asked.

"I'm my own wife. Was this the pâté you meant? We've a couple of hours before the people start arriving."

"Thank God it won't be a necking party. Do you know I didn't get to bed till four this morning? The party last night, you wouldn't believe. Why is it these days you can't *be* with people you like?"

"You sit down and rest," Derek said. "I'll take over preparations."

"No, I promised. After all, this is your flat-warming."

"In that case I may be in the way. Shall I stay or drive around the aesthetic countryside?"

"You go out, darling. I've got this morning's crossword if I feel lonely."

Through the windscreen Derek waved to Janice, tiny in the third window up the row like a strip of film. He steered out of the car park beneath the apartments, toy cars lined up in their cardboard box, and was carried past his tiny picturesque church, between red brick perspectives, drowsy trees, into a warm breeze sharp with dust. He was pleased to have this flat outside Brichester, among the lulling leaves, the open fields, somewhere to escape the daily press of Brichester, the false harsh rainbow of the packed cars, the hard bleached University smashing and swallowing ornate facades, churches robbed

of dignity by plummeting iron balls, streets where some lone house had struck him speechless with its silent pride, the noble bearing of its age and history. A cart creaked by; its driver nodded to Derek. The car purred onward, its note one with the dreaming fields, the red-brick cottages, the hills on the horizon. On such a day as this Derek worshipped God. Ahead the road rose to a bridge; a railway line was threaded through, stretched taut to Brichester, left slack among the first hills on the right. It was good of Janice to hostess his party. He'd met her three weeks ago at the Radio Brichester studio, fending off a randy disc-jockey; "I don't think we can use a programme on the arts just yet, but we'll keep you in mind" was still ringing in Derek's ears, but on an impulse he'd approached her. "Can you show me the way out?" he'd asked, the first question that came to mind. He'd sensed her gratitude. By the time they'd reached the door he'd learned that she appeared on record shows, several evenings a week when she was free from her work with disabled drivers. "I'm for a drink to drown my sorrows," he'd told her at the door. "Can I tempt you?" And afterward—"Will you walk across town with me?" she'd asked. "I don't like crowds when I'm alone." The car poised on a crest and plunged. Janice was gone. The country opened round him.

Into the hills Derek let the car bear him where it would, through the countryside across which the sun's shade was fleetingly drawn. fields sleekly ruffled as cats' fur, distant grassy slopes where wind phantoms chased like hunting hounds. The road curved. A wood fell from its edge toward Goatswood. Where it grew thickest a lay by encroached. Derek turned the car and stepped out.

Each corridor of trees seemed made to be explored, each green shadow promised mystery. He slid down the smooth grass to the first trunks. The sun's rays shaded into a submarine twilight. Above his head each leaf was brilliantly depicted, like an image of the piercingly precise birdsong which punctuated the afternoon. On his left a track led deeper. He avoided it—he sought mystery, the fulfilment of adventure. Dessicated leaves cracked underfoot like shells as he strayed to the right. The stout boles closed him in, looking back, he could no longer see his car. This was the only pure aesthetic, the true poetry, he thought. The bird-calls lured him onward. Crushed scents of trampled undergrowth moved with him; he thrust between trunks, cracking strips of bark, wading through tall grass, brushing aside dulled and somnolently nodding flowers. Overhead the branches interlocked and merged, translucent leaves glowed. The bird-song was muffled, suffocating. Derek's toe plunged into fungoid trumpets. The air swarmed with midges. His feet sank

into rotting leaves. It must be time to turn back. Janice would be waiting. He disengaged his sleeve from an outstretched branch, but in the underwater light he could not read his watch. He drove forward blindly, through a solid curtain of leaves, and fell into a clearing.

An insect struggled from the grass before his face, its diaphanous wings rainbowed like a trembling soap-bubble. He scrambled to his feet and saw the tree.

Its roots were clenched, crumbling the earth. From them it swelled, gigantic, to its first thrusting branches, pushing back the trees which encircled the clearing; through its meshed canopy of leaves others could be glimpsed, piled like cloud-banks. Its rich trunk, dark yet warm, stood alone on a mound of autumn built high from the edge of the glade. And from the overwhelming branches fruit depended like solid drops of sap, large as apples, soft and shaped as peaches.

After an age Derek stepped forward. His first gasp still trembled through the glade. Above him banked leaves rustled. A breeze sifted down. A branch shook. And as his hand shot out, a fruit fell on his palm.

It was a ball of pale velvet. He caressed it, searching for a flaw; there was none. It shone against the brown mound. Without thinking, he lifted his hand and bit into the fruit.

Juice coursed from it; he threw back his head and drained the liquid, spilling amber down his chin. In the shade his fingers were sticks of honey. He chewed and categorized. It was useless. He had tasted nothing to compare. Wine, fruit, meat—something of each, yet on another plane, something almost spiritual which was beyond eating, was the sunlight, shade, the open fields, the moment when one is truly alone and yet a part of all. For a moment he wished he could share the tree with someone. Janice. He gulped the fruit.

He rammed the trunk. It stood its ground. He ran to the lowest branch and leapt. The mound obstructed him. He smashed through the screening leaves and tore a limb from the nearest tree, broke back into the clearing and clubbed a branch. Caterpillars dropped on threads and drew themselves up to safety. He clubbed again. Fruit fell, softly swallowed by the mound. He darted to them, caught them up and stuffed his pockets. Around him leaves fell and became the mound, shaping the silence.

A woman was whimpering, sobbing, straining for words. The flat, too twilight yet for light, was full of people, sitting on furniture, leaning, grouped about each other. Hands greeted Derek. "It's simply that I can't get interested in a thriller printed in Monotype Bembo," Graham Fisher said, closing a

conversation, and "I think Gilbert and Sullivan are the true pop art," remarked John Williams, abandoning another. The sobbing woman was a record: Luciano Berio's *Visage*, before which Alan Price was rapt. Derek looked for Janice: she shone beyond the crowd, her black and blood-red military dress buckled with a medal like an engraved moon, the occasional hint of underskirt, bronze tights, crimson sunset shoes. Smiling, she waved.

"Oh, Jan, let me scribble some sketches," Derek said. "Cohering the group over there is Graham Fisher—of *Identity and Awareness* and *Ambiguity*, of course—restrained by Pat, and trying to get a word in are Norma, our consultant on table manners, and John Brighthouse, who's following Steinbeck from job to job . . . Then John Williams is the singing solicitor, and backing away from Berio is Alan, poet, critic and transcendentalist—trying to convert Bob Grant to the new music. Bob, together with John and Beryl Stretch here, maintains a certain sanity in these proceedings— Oh, you know them?"

"I've had time to circulate, darling. Anyway, I know John and Beryl from the Playhouse Theatre bar." Janice turned back to them. "So it's all over with Frank," she continued. "He started to bore me. As soon as I get someone I want—"

"I'll set out the pâté," Derek said.

"—I don't want them any more. He'd reached the stage of ringing up— 'what are you doing to me?'—at two in the morning "

Bodies passed across the engraved moon. The sobbing voice had found words, but was shouted down by a terrifying male chorus. Derek set plates around the low table like decorations and balanced in the triangles of pâté. "A vote of thanks to Jan," he called through the curlicues of smoke, the floating conversations. The record slowed and clicked silent. "How about John Cage?" Alan called hopefully. "Eat now, think later," Derek replied and waited while they joined him at the table, trailing conversations.

Janice, John and Beryl sat at the other end from Derek. "I think you'll like Spain," Janice said. "Except for the bullfighting. I was the only one in the hotel who wouldn't go. And of course there's all these marvellous churches on one side and the beggars on the other. You're awfully far away, Derek," she protested.

"Sorry." He took a bite of pâté to link himself with her. Then he stared at the bitten triangle. "My God," he muttered.

"What's wrong, isn't it any good?" asked Janice.

"It's beautiful, you don't need me to tell you. It's just—" There was no way to put it into words.

"Everyone coming to the Pinter at the Playhouse on Saturday?" John Stretch asked the others.

"I saw it in London," Derek said, fighting free of some preoccupation. "Magnificently menacing but lacking in cosmic perspective, as you'd say, Graham. I'm staying in on Saturday for Debussy on tv—call round later if you're free, folks. Listen, Jan, let's recap on Spain for a minute. Aside from your anti-Catholic point, which we'll overlook, how do you relate your horror of bullfighting to, say, this pâté which you bought? Have you any idea how pâté is produced?"

"Come on, Derek, there's a world of difference. Food is a necessity, but you can't tell me—"

"No specific food is necessary, Janice. If you're going to be true to your dislike of causing suffering then you should turn vegetarian." He abstractedly bit into the triangle and was again distracted.

"I like that, attacking my pâté with your mouth full of it!"

"You know I'm not attacking you personally, darling. As for me—well, of course we Catholics don't accept that animals feel pain. It would make nonsense of the whole religious analysis of pain."

"God! Derek, have you ever heard a dog after a car's had its back legs?" asked Janice furiously. "I think you simply use religion as a shield. If you're confronted with something frightful you say it's the will of God. Can't you act instead of thinking? Substantiate or withdraw!" she cried—a pet phrase and Derek's favorite—it called to his love of argument.

He put down the gnawed pâté, he'd think about that later. "There's so little one person can do," he said.

Janice and John Brighthouse were dancing to the Rolling Stones, her medal flashed its hieroglyph. The lights were on, Derek, sipping whisky, stared through his reflected face at the spires of Brixchester silhouetted on the barred sky. He should have bought Janice a present for her help. Suddenly he thought of the fruit in a paper bag in his car. That first taste of pâté—"I'm working on a study of the Jehovah's Witness morality in Mickey Spillane," Alan said to someone, and joined Derek. "I'd like to take you up on pain," he remarked.

"Go ahead." Derek turned from Janice luminous above Brixchester to Janice.

"You look as if you want to dance with her."

"I can't." Each tip of him was an extension of his mind, too sensitive to be forgotten in the gay trance of dancing. "Forget it. What did you want to say?"

"To begin with, that pain is abstract. You can't feel someone else's pain, which is why you could eat that pâté."

If he only knew—"I agree with you," Derek said. "Like the lover overwhelming his suffering beloved with solicitude. Too much sympathy is a reaction against not being able to experience the other's suffering; it can become irritating for both. For all he knows she'd rather be left alone."

"Precisely. And conversely you can't communicate your own suffering, only you can handle it. I'm not at all religious as you know, but to take a mystical line—No, let's call it intellectual. You talk of experiences—aesthetics and art and so on—but in a sense pain is only another experience. We know we can switch off experiences—you can withdraw intellectually from an experience and it immediately becomes meaningless. Shouldn't you similarly be able to render pain meaningless?"

"It's an interesting point," The record halted: "Bah, pas encore plus de Pierres qui Roulent!" Bob Grant protested. "And yet—" Derek continued—"let's not underestimate sympathy. There could be situations where someone else might be the only salvation."

"Doesn't anyone want to stay for a slice of Penderecki's *St Luke Passion*?" Derek suggested. But coats were being held and donned, buses, trains were waiting; everyone was leaving.

A light rain pricked the hot air. Derek and Janice ran beneath a coat to his car. "Only the bourgeois care about getting wet," called Graham, answered by Pat: "Graham, don't be pretentious!"

Ahead John Stretch's car pulled out, sluicing the rain from its roof. Alan climbed into the back of Derek's car. "Hello, darling, I hope you enjoyed the party?" Janice asked. Derek followed John's blurred tail-light through the sprinkled mist to the Lower Brixhester bus terminus. He was glad she'd liked the party, it had been hers as much as his. "Jan, if you find a paper bag on the window-ledge," he said, "it's for you."

"Aren't you sweet! What is it?" In the mirror he saw her hand, groping against headlights. Paper rustled. "All that's in here," she said, "is a gooey mess I've just put my hand in."

"Jan, I'm awfully sorry. It was something special, really. It must have gone bad."

"That's a bit lowbrow for you, Derek, surely," Alan said, "practical joking?"

A whistle blew. Couples parted and ran to their buses. Two policemen watched a loud crowd stamp upstairs. Janice and Alan turned up their collars

against the gusts of drizzle. "There's a fantastic Hogarth-atmospheric pie-stall specially for you near here, Alan. I'll probably see you at the weekend," Derek said. "I've taken the week off from the library to enjoy my flat."

"I don't think I'd like to live alone for ever," Janice said.

Friday. The morning after. It was late, the curtains swayed in sunlight. Derek felt as muffled as the music from the radio in the flat above. He padded through his flat, gathering the scattered records—Bertie, the Rolling Stones, the unplayed Penderecki—and shelved them, then he blotted out the brass band overhead with Dylan: "All I really want to do—is baby be friends with you." Undigested fragments of the party returned to him. The bag of fruit bruised as flesh. The pâté. He wasn't yet ready to think. He filled his bath, spied on by Picasso's eyes; through the ceiling came the calls of marriage. He balled his pyjamas, later to the laundry. Lying in the bath, waiting for his thoughts to form, he watched the water dull, turn grey. Poor wife upstairs, washing her husband's clothes. How displeasing the body was, how unaesthetic; that was why Derek didn't think he'd ever marry—the daily stains were something to be concealed in shame. He picked up the soap. He hoped Janice hadn't thought the bag of rotting fruit had been a joke.

When he'd taken his first bite of pâté the taste had been that of the fruit, of the sunlight. Astonished, he might have mused for hours, but he'd set the miracle aside for conversation. Just a powerful attentaste, he'd thought. But not so: subsequent tastes had been the pâté, transformed into the fruit. He couldn't question, he'd accepted. Something had entered and elevated him. Why hadn't he been able to communicate the experience? No matter, now it was part of him. And if Janice had been right about the suffering of animals. Of course she hadn't, but he could bypass moral doubts, there was now no argument against becoming vegetarian. No longer need he take hours over cooking. There was only so much time in this world, time to read the Dali he'd bought months ago, to read *The Golden Bough* at which he'd once said "Any rational Catholic should be capable of reading Frazer." He rose wet from the bath, dried, dressed and went into the kitchen.

A boiled egg to begin with. The water churned and bubbled. Derek's tongue was thick with last night's whisky. He enthroned the egg within its cup. Folding a sandwich, he chewed.

The taste was there, but disappointing. Still, he thought, it must be the hangover. One would scarcely appreciate a sunset with a hangover. Unless the effect was wearing off. He'd collect more fruit later, more than he needed for himself. But first, the *Brixhaster Herald* and the *Times*.

The last few lines of sunlit rain lashed across the windscreen and were split into component drops. On an impulse he turned left toward Graham's and Pat's bungalow beyond Brichester, the children Mark and Baby Jane, to talk of his experience. But the bungalow was silent, shining; Graham must be at a librarian's conference, Pat and the children would be shopping. Baulked, he aimed for Goatswood, for the lay-by.

He stood before the forest. Transmuted by the rain, the twigs were strands of steel, melting brightly, dripping. Ahead a path plunged, the tree stood somewhere to the right. He'd collect fruit for Janice and make sure they were sound. He trod through the drenched grass, branches wept on him. Ahead the depths glittered like jewelled shadow. Trunks forced diversions. Somewhere birds fluttered and complained. Deep in the labyrinth he stopped, struck off to the left toward a looming bole, halted, retraced his tracks. He'd tied no thread to twigs. He threshed onward, his legs were soaked. Another distant trunk betrayed its promise. He pressed toward a filtered fan of sunlight, which withdrew as he approached. A screen of leaves before him seemed secretive, parted, it revealed only vistas of dim branches. At last he turned, beat back twined foliage, emerged onto the road and walked back to his car. Perhaps another day. Next time he'd draw a map.

A storm massed overhead. Suffocated by the thick air and by the stench of damp leaves, Derek felt a little sick. He decided on a meal, not his own—he'd find a restaurant to calm his stomach. He drove toward Brichester. Above the dull hills streaks of light broke free and were suppressed. As he passed his flat two windows in the strip lit up, his own was dark. He thought of Janice.

In the rain the multicolored signs of Brichester varied rhythmically, like kinetic art. Passing the pillars of the Art Gallery, Derek saw the poster of an exhibition; he'd take a look and then eat in the coffee bar.

On the walls colors pulsed like blood, blocks of red leapt forward and sprang back to give place to the blue, monochrome spirals spun and drew him in, perspectives changed, constructions flaunted their impossibility. His faint nausea whirled. Resonating footsteps led him down the corridor to the coffee bar. Colors marched by, meaningless. As he reached the bar he was attacked by a blast of heat and coffee. He bought a cup and sandwiches. Searching for a seat among the jagged sculptures, he came upon Alan Price, writing at a table.

"A new poem?" Derek asked. Then he saw that Alan was completing a crossword. "Shades of Janice," he remarked.

"This is hers. She left a few minutes ago for somewhere. She's attractive, isn't she?"

"Yes, very." Derek couldn't concentrate; he felt faint. Around him the muted conversations were receding. He stared at his plate. His stomach was beyond control. He stood up carefully. "If you can eat this for me, go ahead," he said, steadying himself with a chair. "The best thing I can do is to lie down."

Next morning he couldn't face food. During the night he'd been troubled by gulps of some taste he hadn't been able to place. Perhaps he hadn't brushed his teeth. The weakness in his stomach trembled through his limbs. He hadn't been to the doctor for years; he hadn't felt the need. Now he felt incapable of coping without help. He struggled to the car, wearily cleaned the speckled windscreen, and drove slowly to the surgery on the edge of Briches-ter.

He should have brought something to read, he had no urge to study *Woman's Own* or *Beano*, nor yet the *Daily Mirror*. Opposite him a toothless woman mouthed silently, stretching threads of saliva; usually he'd have felt sympathy, but suffering had dulled his responses. Children ran about the waiting-room, frequently brought to heel and screaming, soon released to chase once more, knocking against Derek's brain. Derek read the National Health posters, distracted by the choreography of raised heads each time the surgery bell shrilled. Two hours later, he reached Dr Love.

"Well, well, well, Derek, isn't it? What seems to be the trouble?" The doctor filled his swivel chair; in the mirror his grey cupola of hair betrayed its careful brushing.

"I seem to have acquired an upset stomach." Once exposed to the air, Derek's prepared phrase disintegrated.

"Dear, dear, I see, yes. And have you eaten anything that's disagreed with you?"

"Not that I can think of. Well, I did eat some fruit." Immediately Derek regretted saying so; it couldn't be the fruit, and he could scarcely describe his experience in the woods.

"Ah, is that right, now? And what kind of fruit was that?"

Derek searched; he might as well be pretentious. "Lychees, actually." Dr Love raised his eyebrows. "It's a kind of Chinese dessert, like—well, I don't know—" Derek trailed off.

"I see, I see, yes. Well, we'd better give you something for your tummy." The doctor scribbled. "And how old are you now, Derek? Really, twenty-seven, is that right? Still working at the library?"

The door opened and the doctor's wife came in, hands swaddled in knitting. "Tommy's feeling ill," she said.

"Well, now, tut, tut. We can't have that, can we. You keep an eye on him and I'll be up to see him. This'll keep your tummy happy," he told Derek. "Come and see me in a few days if it doesn't clear up. Well, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye..."

Waiting for the prescription to be filled, Derek wandered to a news-stand. His stomach seemed calmer, cowed by the threat of medicine. He bought a *Brixchester Herald*; on the front page was a photograph of the Radio Brixchester personnel, in the background Janice in a military mini-skirt, looking as if she'd rather not be photographed—he couldn't imagine why. He was sorry he'd missed her at the coffee bar, but he would have been poor company. He returned for the medicine.

Back at his flat he unwrapped the bottle, heavy with a thick white liquid. He poured a spoonful. Some escaped, although he tried to tip it in, and crawled down the neck between his fingers, solidifying into a drip of tallow. He swallowed the spoonful. It was nauseating, reminiscent of something he'd forgotten. He left the bottle on the table and gazed from the window at the silver railway, leading the eye to emptiness. The swallowed liquid fought for freedom. He constricted his throat, moved unsteadily to the bed, stripped and lay back.

A knock at the door awakened him. When he opened his eyes, he realized that it had come before he was awake. He waited, but there was silence. Who could it have been? Janice, perhaps? He stood up and threw his dressing-gown around him. The room whirled through his brain. He reached the door and fumbled it open. A transparent sheet of sunlight made an angle with the empty hall. He padded to the stairwell and peered down, but only hot dust moved.

His stomach sickly yawned. Angry with himself, he supported his legs to the kitchen and glanced about for food. Anything to fill him. He buttered bread; he watched the knife spread blobs of grease. Sickness rose, but determinedly he picked up a slice and chewed.

The night's taste was defined. It was the fruit—but as in the paper bag. The wine was bitter, the meat crawled, the juice drooled thickly. He dropped the bread and pinched his lips shut with his fingers. Frantically he read the clock: ten past four—time for the medicine. It must work. He filled the spoon and shut his eyes. Unbelieving, he stared at the spoon. The medicine was the fruit,

but the decay had progressed. The spoon thudded on the carpet. Suddenly he clapped his hand over his mouth and rushed into the bathroom.

He lay down shaking. Heat clung like steam. The room veered, spun, swayed as in a storm. The taste seeped through him. At last it was intolerable, sweating, revolted by his body, he weaved to the sink and drew off a glass of water. At the first sip he knew. His hand drooped into the sink, the glass slid free and spilled.

There was nothing to do but accept. He lay inert. A bird's silhouette flashed across the ceiling and was gone. He closed his eyes, empty of intelligence. Gradually the sea stilled.

He couldn't hear what Janice was saying. His throat was clogged. The vortex of darkness on his eyes remained when he opened them, it was night. Janice was still speaking. Her voice came from above. She was in the married couple's radio. Derek's eyes closed. The coffee bar. Alan but no Janice. Alan's point—"to render pain meaningless." A thought explored Derek's brain, touching, reviving. His body lay enervated, but his mind still functioned. His mind, his soul, suppose it had some supernatural power, inherent in its identity with God, to heal his body—

Nonsense. Nothing so mystical. His mind was in control, it knew that food tasted as it looked, for how else could it taste? His mind took control. It forced him upright, inserted his shaking limbs into clothes, urged him into the kitchen. The light found the slice of bread on the floor, collecting fluff. He almost broke, but his mind was ruthless; he gasped but that was all. It guided his hand to the door, set his feet on the stairs. To conquer the body—this was true self-sufficiency.

The icy front-door knob shuddered through him, he was outside. He went toward the car, but his mind forbade him; he might weaken and cause harm. He'd walk. His watch showed eleven. The nearest restaurant open at that hour was on the edge of Lower Brichester, less than half-an hour away.

The road was bare, raked by the night-wind. The moon hung bruised like fruit. He dragged himself along by the wall, it crumbled beneath his nails. A car came up behind him, he extended a thumb and tell back as the car flashed past. But why? he cried. What have I done? His mind drew itself up sternly; he concentrated on the distance gained. Beyond his flat a train muttered beneath the bridge. A second car rushed by; a couple in the back pointed and laughed. "Sober up!" they shouted. Grimly he followed their garish light to the crest of a hill. Below on hillsides headlights exchanged winks, beyond, the steady lights of Lower Brichester.

When he reached the restaurant, swaying down the street toward him as he fought an itch in his throat, it was closed. The pane beneath his forehead cooled his brain. There must be other restaurants. Inside, above the inverted chairs, a clock showed midnight. Desperately he looked to his watch for help, but found none. Three motor-cyclists roared by shouting; a cat scampered from their headlights. Derek wadded his handkerchief over his nose. In the next street the motor-cycles coughed their last. Then he remembered, round the corner was an all-night pie stall. The wind cleared the grey fumes, and Derek tottered forward.

When he reached the stall there was a brief struggle, he wanted to flee the drunks chewing and spitting, the two smeared trestle tables, the girl behind the counter, surrounded by the motor-cyclists, the corners of her eyes blocked by sleep—but his mind was adamant. The food was edible, he'd eaten here one midnight, so that he already knew its taste. Gripping the counter, gripping his throat from within, he ordered two pork pies and a coffee. Discs of grease floated on the coffee as in a stagnant pool, he pushed the cup to one end of the counter and unwrapped the lukewarm cellophane from a cold pie. You know how this will taste, he told himself. The nature of the world can't change. He bit.

Around the far corner of the stall came Alan Price, taking in the tables, the drunk asleep at one. "Derek's right," he said enthusiastically. "It's like Hogarth 1968."

Janice touched his arm. "I don't like it," she said. "I find it frightening."

The fruit had decayed completely. Derek staggered behind the stall and was violently sick. When he swayed out of the shadow, Janice and Alan had gone. The stall, the watching eyes, were unreal, part of some other world. He hadn't purged himself of the taste, it was stronger than before, filling his mouth, his nostrils. A hundred yards from the stall he saw a taxi-rank. A hundred yards—yes, levering himself along the walls, picking himself up when he crumpled, he would just make it. He knew that this time the taste would not fade.

Above him a voice sang "Deo gratias." He was awake at once, the fruit woke with him. But he had triumphed. As he'd rocked miserably in the taxi he'd seen salvation. When he'd reached his flat he'd found an envelope thrust beneath the door. He'd opened it and read: "We all came round after the play but you weren't in. Lovely news! Radio Brichester say they'll be able to use your programme on the arts! Love, Janice . . ." It no longer mattered. As the taxi had approached his flat he'd seen the church against the moon, no longer quaint, just solid. He wasn't alone with his suffering. Instantaneously the

altar, the inextinguishable light, dimmed down the years from his childhood, sprang into dazzling focus. That night he slept.

The radio church service in the flat above moved singing down the aisle. Derek stood; his head throbbed, his gorge rose, intensifying the taste. Calmly he dressed, ignoring shudders. The taste grew sweeter, cloying. No matter, it was meant: perhaps to reconfirm him from his dutiful Sunday church-going, to impose a fast, to bring him back to God, to strengthen him. He descended the stairs, only once falling against the banister, his perspiring hand sliding down the metal.

To the left of the path stood bright white headstones. Cars gathered at the gate, women gossiped as they donned their hats, children struggling on the grass separated at their father's call. A girl in a mini-skirt crossed herself and caught her toppling transistor radio, eager to be outside again and listening. Derek brushed by her, moved unsteadily to the front row, looked up at the flame dulled by the stained-glass sunlight, and knelt.

The organ blared. Everyone stood. The stained glass image was a trifle naive, Derek thought. He brought his eyes back to the flame. At the next cue he deliberately stood abruptly, jolting his body, wrenching his stomach. I offer this as penance. The priest preached on the evils of the mini-skirt. Janice? Of course not. The true God was behind the priest, was the flame that would sear the taste from Derek's throat. He would take Communion. His acceptance of his suffering had purified him, he knew. A bell rang, the purest members of the congregation hurried to be first at the altar rail. Derek bowed his head. This is my body. He looked up and saw the priest raise the first wafer from the chalice.

He choked. The fruit transmuted everything. At once he knew how the wafer would taste. The bench collapsed. He clawed himself to his feet and blundered down the aisle, crashing into pews, knocking communicants aside. Incense suffocated him like poison-gas. He fell out of the church. The void surrounding him would not tolerate a God, and no God could tolerate the void. He ran blindly, fleeing the taste which moved with him. A tombstone tripped him. He fell to his knees, then forward.

For an age he lay there, mouth gaping against the soil, hands gripping stone. Then he heard voices. He raised his head. His hands recoiled from the headstone whose erased name could have been anyone's. In the babble on the path, he thought he heard a voice he knew. It seemed to call to him. Spitting soil, forgetting the taste, he strained his ears. At last he was sure. Slowly, painfully, he raised himself. The congregation was emerging onto the sunlit

pebbled path, some meeting friends. He could see no face he recognized, but the voice, its words inaudible, continued. In a minute they would turn and see him.

He turned aside from the tombstone, and began to crawl toward Janice's voice.

MADE IN GOATSWOOD

The man behind the counter of the curiosity shop wore a cloth cap, when he bent his head Terry Aldrich felt he was being served by a toad. The man's hands were brown and crinkled as the paper in which he wrapped the parcels. The paper flapped: dust billowed round the shop, passing like incense across the window through which the summer sun was dulled as by sunglasses, changing form and leaving particles on clasped leather-bound books, carved vases, ornamental knives, a naked wooden boy frozen in the act of crying praises to the sun or possibly of beating off an attack from above. The hands set the parcel before Terry; he thought that the dim eyes gleamed in derision. Briefly his hand was clasped by fingers drier than the notes he paid.

His car was parked at the end of the street, beyond a canvas stall like a shrine; a girl's eyelids lowered wickedly as she held out fruit which reminded him of peaches. He shook his head. Across the street, beyond the crowd, the shirts revealing arms muscled as with roots, the dresses flaunting thick legs and breasts, a man stripped to the waist stood against a hot wall gnawed by weeds and stared at Terry's parcels. He grinned, and Terry grinned back. he was overwhelmed by Goatswood. He admired them all, they were rooted in the earth, in nature.

Ted Pyke turned in the front seat as Terry dumped the parcels in the back. A girl squeezed by Terry, warm with sweat imperfectly overlaid with perfume, her bare leg brushed his. "Presents for the girl friend?" Ted commented. "I should be sure she wants them before you spend your money."

Terry climbed in beside him and started the engine. "I told you, Kim's a gardener," he said. "These ought to bring her garden closer to nature."

They drove toward Brichester. The curtained windows of Goatswood's

offices blazed in the sun like stamps on display. Even here, Terry thought, beneath the office buildings, one could sense the moist earth, rich as a ripe field, he imagined the workers returning not to the red-brick houses beneath hillsides held in thrall by the bright still air, but to canted cottages, moist at dawn, resounding with the snorts of muddy pigs. If only he could persuade Kim to live on a farm! He was sure that they could learn to make it work—but he knew she'd never agree; he'd accepted this. As he turned the driving mirror, wincing at a brief blade of sunlight, he saw the parcels jostling on the back seat. "Symbols of the earth," he said to himself.

"I don't know what you said," Ted muttered, "but I'm sure you weren't talking to me."

"Sorry, Ted. I've even got Kim talking to herself, she says. It's the sign of an enquiring spirit."

"I'm sure," Ted said.

On their left the progress of the houses had already been barred by trees. Opposite, before the woods closed in, a last street of dingy houses lay exhausted between gardens high with grass, uneven with rocks, and on the corner a newspaper shop, its cramped windows full of yellowed cards; baked mud preserved the tracks of cars. "Stop here," Ted ordered.

"I thought you wanted a lift all the way to Brichester."

"I've changed my mind. This is Fitzroy Street. You've heard me talk about it in the pub. You find the card you fancy in the window of that shop, and they direct you."

"At this time of day?" Terry had heard Ted's tales in his local pub, but he hadn't thought about them, he didn't know Ted well enough to care. "I hope you get your money's worth. Good God, man, what can you gain from this?"

"A woman who won't keep you awake wondering when she's going to leave you, that's what. Maybe one day you'll know what I mean."

"I hope not," Terry said. He drove on, flinging Ted's hand from the door. He felt cheapened, stopping for that on his way to Kim. "I may love nature," he said aloud. "That doesn't place me with the animals." Behind him Goatswood was swallowed by the forest. On the back seat paper rustled.

On the frosted front-door pane Kim shimmered, flesh and flowered cotton. The pane flashed and they embraced, her hair was warm and scented as her flowers. Behind her in the hall an angel hung, eternally elevated. "There's something for you on the back seat," Terry said. "It's not much, I'm afraid."

"Oh, what?" She sped between the ranked flowers and opened the car door.

On the seat the paper had split, rough grey faces grinned at her. They were ornamental gnomes.

"They're like devils," Kim said. Terry came up to her. "They're—different, aren't they?" she commented.

"I thought you needed something for the garden," he said.

Drawn by the open doors, Kim's mother approached. "Heavens, what are those?" she cried.

"Look what Terry's brought me."

"You must be famished, Terry. We should really wait till Kim's father comes home, but—"

"That's fine," Terry said. "We can decorate the garden while we're waiting."

"The front's a bit crowded. They might go better in the back," Kim suggested. Terry lifted them carefully, like a father cradling babies, and carried them through the house; beyond the painted angel radiating her own sunlight, they heard the clatter of plates. In the back garden two flowerbeds blazed about the lawn, near the hedge, over which rose the first trees of Brichester Central Park, a rockery shone dull red, tending to molten in a tinge of sunset. On the clothesline pegs nodded like birds. "I think they'd only make the garden seem more artificial," Terry said. "Would you rather they weren't seen?"

"Of course I wouldn't, darling." But she was glad that the street was almost deserted. On the pavement opposite a small girl in a muslin curtain and a tablecloth led a quiet procession, Kim hoped they weren't blaspheming. Two legs drew their body from beneath a Mini. Mr Logan from across the way, who waved to her and watched Terry, setting the gnomes in a triangle, the apex staring over the low white stone wall.

Finished, he leapt the wall and considered the garden. Kim took his hand. They weren't amiable suburban gnomes at all. The eyes were grey globes set deep in pits; the noses were hooked like those of childhood witches she'd leafed over, the mouths grinned, revealing pointed teeth. Terry indicated the park behind the houses, the trees awakened by an evening breeze, like an outpost of Goatswood beyond, he pointed to Mercy Hill, his home, where a spire fingered the sun above the hills. "Now there's something of that here," he said.

A car drew up to Terry's. "I'm glad you're here," said Kim's father. "You can help me argue my case for salad."

"Splendid," Terry agreed. "Plants torn from the soil. Nature in the home."

"I've made salad already," said Kim's mother from the doorway

"Well done." Kim's father started up the path, then saw the gnomes. "What on earth are these?" he asked the evening "It looks like a Druids' meeting-place."

"Probably," Terry told Kim "There'll be a hot time in Goatswood on Monday."

June 24, thought Kim. "Why?" she asked.

But at that moment a spoon clanged within a pan; her mother was announcing tea.

Terry sat back, full. Outside the front-room window the backs of the gnomes seemed to emanate dusk, drawing color from the flowers. Kim's father was reading the *Brichester Herald*, her mother was pouring the tea. He saw the crowd outside the curiosity shop in Goatswood, accepting the sunlight, vital, primitive. "I can't get over that film we saw on Thursday," he said to Kim "The sheep running into the church as soon as revolution breaks out. The flight from primitivism."

"Whoever made that film," declared the *Brichester Herald*, "must be a very unhappy man."

"All this godlessness that's going round can cause nothing but unhappiness," Kim's mother said. He saw her glance above the mantelpiece and return Christ's look of sorrow.

"Why should the director be unhappy?" Terry argued "He has a vision"

The *Brichester Herald* came down like a veil. "But not a belief. Anyone who destroys more than he creates must be miserable beyond expression. Question what you see by all means, but believe in something first."

"What do you believe in?"

"What's around me," said Kim's father instantly "Not politics disguised as panaceas, not poets trying to be philosophers. This house. My job. Reality"

"There's only one right and one wrong," Kim's mother told her. "Those who don't take the right road know they're doing wrong"

"That's my exit line," Kim's father said, taking out his pipe and striding to the sitting-room.

Her mother carried out the first plates. Kim stared after her, toward the angel. Terry touched Kim's fingers "You didn't say anything," he rebuked

"Why should I, Terry? I'm happy." She pressed his hand and followed her mother with plates. In the garden he could see the gnomes, faceless now, they were grey lamps of stone like memorials. Behind him the light was switched on; a luminous female reflexion engulfed a gnome "Terry," Kim's mother

whispered, "it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you understand Kim enough to make her happy."

Her mother was ironing a cardigan; she folded its arms on its chest. The scent of warm wool streamed out the open window. Kim took a cup from the kitchen table and carried it brimming to her father. As he set aside the *Herald* he said, "You don't like those objects in the garden, do you?"

"I suppose they're pagan. But that's not the point. The point is, they're Terry's."

"That's certainly not the point. If you object you must tell him. If you suppress it you'll kill your beliefs. I've seen this happen. I know."

"I'll have my coffee in a minute," Kim called into the kitchen. She'd packed the picnic basket for tomorrow, now, as always before she went to bed, she communed with her garden. The air was soft as fur. Soothing, the flowers weaved gently in the breeze. But the night was jagged, torn by the harsh stones on the lawn. Perhaps she might persuade Terry against them after all, but not on her father's advice, she knew where that led. She looked toward Mercy Hill; lights moved across intersections—perhaps one was Terry. She tried to isolate his window from the display, and was distracted. A grey cat was slinking somewhere on the lawn, about to brush against her leg. She glanced down, but there was nothing, colorless grass, the back of a stone head. Turning, she closed the front door and saw the angel.

As Terry drove to collect Kim, a clock struck midday. His hand rose from the wheel, he'd made half the sign of the cross before he knew. For those who'd died during the hour, as he'd been taught. His hand dropped. He didn't believe. "Pray to believe," he'd been told—but he saw this as more delusion than paradox: praying to something he didn't believe in for help to believe it existed. Yet he feared to think too deeply on his unbelief, he'd accepted a hostile universe, he couldn't be expected to do more. "Believe in something first," he addressed the windscreen ironically. "In Nazism? In the unholiness of blood transfusions?" He passed the church, its stained glass exalted by the sun, and stopped before the Sunday school where Kim taught, beyond, cars glinted on the hills.

In the red house children sang. Terry went round to the back seat and settled the hamper which Kim's mother had given him when he called. "If it rains don't forget you can come back here," she'd said. A troupe of Girl Guides marched past, their blouses blue as the blinding sky. The door of the red house opened, Kim's class surged out. As Kim appeared, the pleats of her mini dress pink as a flower, a boy and a girl ran past Terry hand in hand. Kim

kissed him. "In front of my class, too. I hope we don't corrupt them," she laughed. "I've got you a little present. Don't hate it, Terry." She opened her hand; a St Christopher medal gleamed gold.

"All right, my darling," he said. "If you think I need protection." He fixed it between them on the windscreen.

He let Kim choose the hill. A dry bare path led up through undergrowth; she ran upward to the smooth grass, her pink pleats flying. Terry dragged the hamper to the top, stopping to survey the countryside: distant tufts of trees, hills still against the piercing blue horizon where skimmed a lone white bird, darting butterflies like windblown scraps of paintings. From the top he could see the toy roofs of Brichester, like red plastic; the trees of Central Park located Kim's house, but his eye was drawn beyond, to the great forest in which Goatswood was set as in a ring of green velvet. "Look at it," he said.

"Don't look at it," said Kim. "Look at me." And as he did so, the countryside blurred.

The grass on which they sat before the empty hamper was warm as the sunset, but the air was cooling. Some of the cars beneath the hills had gone home. "Shall we do down?" Kim asked.

"I think we might." Terry stood up and cast stray papers into the hamper. Suddenly he moved it to stand against the shadowed amphitheatre of Goatswood. "Can I have the lunch-box?" he asked.

Kim couldn't see what he was doing, she passed him the lunch-box, which he set atop the hamper. "A tribute to the forces of the earth," he said.

A stray breeze caught the lunch-box tabernacle and rolled it rattling toward Goatswood.

They were close to her house when Kim said, "Let's go into the park for a while." The gates were open, Terry drove onto the gravel. Near the gates a man was prowling with THE WAGES OF SIN on his chest and the rest behind his back, a bearded prophet clung to an unsteady stand and exhorted evening lovers to take note of the imminent end of the world. Kim caught Terry's eye and smiled up at him. "That's not me," she said.

The trees had trapped the twilight. The branches which the sun had dappled were brown stains on the shadows, leaves moved like hives of darkness. They followed a walk they'd found one day. At its end glimmered a Chinese pavilion. As they emerged from the trees onto shifting pebbles, Kim's hand brushed a twig from which a ball hung, tiger striped, and startled it into myriad tiny spiders, spun away on threads by a breeze.

In the pavilion Kim lay against Terry. His mouth moved round her neck,

and she pressed into him. Through the pavilion's pillars she could see the trees, leaning forward like spectators. She felt him touch her breast. "Not too much at once," she whispered.

"I promise." His hand caressed her. Her eyes closed. As her lashes met, she glimpsed movement between the pillars. A small pale figure darted back among the trees, the crushed grass staggered erect. Children, she thought, spying before they understood. "I think we're being watched," she said in his ear.

"I think we'd better go back to your place." Her parents were at a whist drive. They left the pavilion, arms about each other, and entered the wood. Looking back, Kim saw the pavilion, gleaming like a skeleton, she shivered. As they passed each tree a face peered out behind them. Of course not, she thought: the children wouldn't follow. She pressed her face into the warm cloth of Terry's jacket.

She felt safer in the car, her hand on his knee. But as the car swung about to return to her house, she chilled for a moment. Then she relaxed, what she'd seen photographed between the trees by the headlamps must have been bushes of pale blossom, swaying in a breeze.

Terry bore the cups of coffee high into the front room, as if for ritual. Sitting on the couch, they sipped. Then Kim traced the back of Terry's neck with her fingertips and let him draw her closer. In a minute she'd switch out the light. She thought of Terry coming home each night, of a sitting-room whose details were vague except for the two of them on a rug before the fire. Then the back of her neck prickled. It wasn't the heat. She sensed eyes.

She caught his hand. "Terry, someone's watching," she said.

"What, here too?" He sat up and stared about. His eyes passed over a gap in the curtain and fixed on Christ in accusation. "God," he muttered. "Don't tell me this is a subtle Catholic objection."

"Oh, Terry," she said miserably.

"Well, whoever it is can't be out here, can he?" He ripped back the curtains, light flooded out on the gnomes, drawing immense shadows. "He must be in the room." He indicated, and floating truncated above the garden, his reflexion waved its arms. "I mean, God—if you believe in him—created nature, sex is the word. Why feel ashamed?"

"It wasn't that at all, Terry. I love you." Kim sat on the couch, her head sank.

"I know you do." But he felt religion in the air between them, invisible as

her perfume. "Look, it's just that I wasn't expecting this. I think I'd like to be alone to work it out."

If she'd said "Please don't go"—But she could say it only to herself.

As Terry climbed into his car the front door opened. Kim didn't speak. His last glimpse was of her framed in the bright doorway beyond the stone figures; it was like a temple or a sacrifice.

"He hasn't phoned," Kim wrote. It was the next day; the diary had been Terry's present—she'd admired it once in a shop. Her eyes closed. She tried to control herself, but already her face was pressed into the bed, the white sheets cold as an isolation ward. She'd had to leave the table earlier to come upstairs and weep. Her mother had been about to follow her, but Kim had heard her father say: "Let her come to terms with it. Her beliefs will see her through." Her beliefs! She looked up at the crucifix above her bed with something like hatred. Would she give that up for Terry? But why should she have to choose? She remembered a scene when she was twelve: her father coming home, shaken by a car crash, shaken more to find he'd been under insured and they might have to sell furniture. "So long as you're alive," her mother had said. "I've prayed every night that if this happened you wouldn't be harmed." And he'd exploded. "God didn't buy this house! God won't have to go short to pay for the damage!" Kim had sat trembling on the couch, at twelve it had been as if the house shook. "We won't have to sell my pictures," her mother had pleaded—the angels which had guarded her family for generations. Kim had stuffed her fist in her mouth and buried her head in the couch, but she'd heard the angel shatter. "If they were worth anything—" For a week after that they'd sat silent as wax dummies in an exhibition room, except when her mother broke and rushed upstairs. It was over now, but not for Kim—that had been when she'd determined to be tolerant, for that was all that preserved love. "Oh, Terry," she sobbed, "I tried to please you, not to argue with you! If only you'd do the same for me!"

When it was over she lay exhausted on the bed. Her head throbbed. Deliberately she turned over the blurred pages of the diary. Terry told me today he loved me. I think Terry is looking for a house, but he hasn't said so yet. June 24. Midsummer Eve, of course. She threw the diary on the dressing-table and went downstairs.

Her parents were visiting friends. The house was empty, only the ten o'clock dusk moved through the rooms. She poured herself a glass of orange juice and gulped it down, feeling slightly sick. Drawing the front room curtains, she switched on the television.

As the room's bulging reflexion was ousted by an announcer's face, a car drew up outside. Kim ran out. For a moment she thought it was Terry; she had opened the gate before she realized. Downcast, she returned to the house, kicking the door behind her. The grey heads stared toward the road, except one. A child must have dislodged it with a ball; it faced toward the house.

"I just don't know how our relationship may stand," Terry said. He didn't know whether they could hear him at the bar; he didn't care. But he wouldn't admit even to himself that he was ashamed of last night.

"Still talking to yourself?" Ted Pyke asked. His face swam forward through the yellow light like a shark closing for the kill. "You look a bit off. Trouble with the girl friend?"

"Something like that," Terry said. "Go to hell," he hissed.

"I wouldn't mind a lift to Goatswood. If you want a free introduction—"

Terry remembered the girl whose bare leg had brushed his in the sunlight. "Don't be so eager," he told Pyke. As they'd watched the sheep flee into the church Kim had touched his hand, she hadn't agreed, but she'd tried to understand what he felt. "I'm going to see her," he said abruptly.

"I may be walking that way later," Pyke said, turning back to the tv above the bar, two flickering lovers in bed, encouraged by the drinkers.

The lovers threw back the covers; the girl stared and trembled. Footsteps plodded up the stairs toward them. It was her father. Kim watched, unwillingly fascinated. The father took shape from the shadows, looming above them. The footsteps continued. Kim leapt forward and turned off the father's voice. Silence, heavy as stone; yet she was sure she had heard the footsteps plodding upward, here in the house. Again she prickled, not with heat. She tiptoed into the hall and was confronted by the angel, radiant, calm, detached.

Beneath the angel the telephone rang.

She caught up the receiver. "Who's there?" she cried.

"I'm sorry about last night," said Terry's voice. "Truly I am."

"So long as you're still here," she said. But he wasn't really there; he was attenuated as the wire; hardly anything of him reached her. She listened for the footsteps.

"I'm coming round to see you. The phone is in our way."

The footsteps must have been an echo in the television. "My parents will be back soon," she told him. "We must work this out together, just the two of us." The wire whispered, voiceless. She'd said the wrong thing, she thought. She didn't dare to call to him, to make sure he was there; he might

have left the phone box. Finally she dropped the receiver back on the hook, like a stone whose weight was too much for her.

When she turned she saw that the front door was open. She hadn't kicked it shut. The gnomes had merged with the dusk which filled the street. She closed the door.

Perhaps Terry was on his way. Reflected on the angel, she saw her face still traced by tears. She wanted to welcome Terry; he musn't see her like this, she didn't want to be pitied. She ran upstairs.

As she collected her makeup bag from the bedroom she smiled at her crucifix. Hurrying to the bathroom, she switched on the light. The neutral tiles reflected back Terry, the rug before the fire. She washed and analyzed her face before the full-length mirror. Her compact clicked. Imperfectly closed, the door at her back crept open. A blade of light opened along the landing floor. It cleaved the mirror and found a face.

Kim whirled. The landing carpet was bright as grass. Of course there was nothing; she had seen merely lumps of shadow, a curve which she couldn't now locate had seemed a grin—perhaps the corner of the landing beyond her parents' open door. "My nerves are on edge," she said, "but Terry's coming."

She powdered her nose. Close by she heard a smash of glass. "A bottle in a dustbin," she said before she could ponder. Deliberately she switched out the bathroom light, braving the darkness. She crossed the landing to her room, and heard slow footsteps in the hall.

Not Terry, surely? Could the front door have opened again? Were her parents home too soon? "Hello," she called. The grey stone silence inched toward her. Footsteps clumped up the staircase in the television—but she'd turned off the sound. She ran to the light-switch by her parents' door, and tripped.

Her makeup bag spilled, her compact clattered down the stairs. She heard it clang against something she couldn't picture halfway up the staircase. One hand comforting her bruises, she felt for what she'd tripped over. Before her fingers touched the wall they recoiled from something like a stone saw, a thick hook, deep cold pits in which something rolled—a face.

When Terry drew up before Kim's house he realized first that the gnomes were gone. The pebbles had exploded wide, discoloring the lawn. So Kim had moved them. In a way he was glad; she'd asserted herself. They could talk and maybe move toward a deeper understanding. He strode up the path between the obscure flowers. The front door stood open, the frosted-glass pane had been smashed.

"Kim!" He rushed into the house, dashing into rooms, switching on lights. On the stairs lay Kim's power-compact, it had been trampled, clumsy footprints faded toward the hall, a large burden had been dragged through the mess, streaking the wall. The bathroom mirror met him; in the other rooms Christ stared down, sorrowing. Terry charged downstairs again, into the kitchen. The back door was open.

Beyond the hedge the trees in Central Park had begun to dance. A new moon hung above them, like a lopsided luminous grin. Terry ranged about the garden. The flowers had closed, unseeing. The clothesline was drawn across the sky like the line at the end of a story. In the hedge he found a gap, where something large might have been dragged along the ground and through into the park. Terry tried to squeeze through, but the hedge grasped his shoulders. He dashed past the rockery, then froze. On the rock liquid glistened. Sick, he bent and caught a drop. It was black on his finger beneath the moon; it might be water. He ran into the light from the kitchen and held out his finger. It was blood.

As he climbed the railings of the park, tearing himself free of the spears, he snarled "If you take Kim, whoever you are—" He remembered the angel he'd passed. The phone: he could have called the police—but to go back now might be to lose Kim. He forced himself to stand still and listen. Branches battled and broke loose, but only in the wind. He plunged into the wood. The trunks were still as pillars, the branches held the luminous grin. Ahead something rushed through the undergrowth, perhaps the midsummer wind.

Deep in the woods he heard a cry. An owl? He couldn't know. Deafened by the ecstatic leaves, he strained his ears. Then he heard ponderous footsteps on wood. He drove himself through the trees toward the sound. At last he saw a distant clearing, trees like a Druid circle, a building which might have been a temple within. His feet flung pebbles wide, and he saw where he was. Before him, ossified by moonlight, stood the Chinese pavilion.

And precariously balanced at the top of the steps, shrunken and pale, a gnome grinned. As he watched it fell forward and toppled down the steps. Blinded by rage at himself, Terry stumbled forward and smashed the gnome to pieces on the pebbles. The stones gnashed, blotting out any final distant sounds among the trees.

When Terry panted back to Kim's house, still confronted by a thousand dim threshing figures which were branches, Kim's father met him in the shattered doorway. He stood like a sentry, blotting out the radiance from within. "Not now, Terry," he said. "Kim's ill."

"You mean she's here?" Then Terry heard the sobbing, and her mother's voice, the words inaudible but soothing.

"We went for a walk in the park to leave her alone for a while. You know what I mean, Terry. We found her there. She was as you can hear. I saw someone running into the bushes, but I haven't got them yet. They must have heard me coming. Her mother held her hand and I carried her back here. If she wants to she'll tell us what happened."

"Thank God," Terry said. Then: "How is she?"

"She'd been knocked unconscious. Her cheek was bleeding, but she's safe. I'm sure of that. The doctor's coming."

"I must see her," Terry cried. But her father blocked his way. "She's been ill all day because of you," he said. "You've brought nothing but chaos into this house. Let's be adult about this, Terry. She's unlikely ever to want to see you again."

"I love her," Terry said.

"So do I. And I've been here longer than you, Terry."

The door closed. Through the shattered pane Terry saw the angel. He stood numb. Then Kim's father reappeared and blocked the view with a piece of cardboard. Terry turned and walked past the empty lawn.

As he drove down the street, a figure waved him to halt. It was Ted Pyke.

"Alone?" Pyke said. "How about my proposition?"

Terry sat silent. "Why not," he muttered finally. "Get in."

Pyke opened the passenger door. The light blazed and caught something on the windscreen. It was the St Christopher medal. Kim's hand touched Terry's. He heard her sobbing. "No," he told Pyke. "I've changed my mind. Find someone else."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'll tell you," Terry said. "I'm not going to be dragged down to your level."

"Thanks," said Pyke. "You bastard."

Terry watched him walk into the night, picking his way from streetlamp to streetlamp. He hadn't liked to say it, but it had had to be said. He turned the car and drove back. He thought of Kim limp on the pillow, purged by tears, her mother at her side. The three of them against her father. So long as she survived.

As he left the car his hands trembled. He controlled one, and looked up to Kim's bright window. Silently he made the sign of the cross. Then he walked toward the house.

Three thousand five hundred copies of this book have been printed and bound by The Collegiate Press, George Banta Company, Inc., Menasha, Wisconsin. Composed in Garamond on a Harris-Intertype Fototronic Cathode-Ray Tube and printed by Belt Press on 55# Cooper. The binding cloth is Holliston Black Novelex.

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Photo by Pam Witcombe

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

Demons by Daylight is Ramsey Campbell's second book, preceded by his *Inhabitant of the Lake*. He was born in Liverpool, England, in 1946, received his education at both Catholic and private schools, and still resides in Liverpool. He began working for the Inland Revenue in 1962, and for the Liverpool Public Libraries in 1966.

Since 1969 he has been film critic for BBC Radio Merseyside, and has a collector's interest in music and comics.

He began writing fiction during his school days, and has had stories published in various anthologies edited by August Derleth, Lin Carter, Richard Davis, David Sutton, and others. His work has been translated into Italian, French, German, Spanish, and Dutch.

Some of his tales have been broadcast by BBC, others read to live improvisation by the Merseyside jazz trio *Machineries of Mind*.

Ramsey Campbell married Jenny Chandler in 1971, and is currently writing a new collection, a novel, and a group of tales set in Liverpool.